MISSING PIECES

EDITED BY MARK PHIPPEN AND SHAUN LYON

INTRODUCTION BY PETER DAVISON - AFTERWORD BY SYLVESTER McCOY

AND FEATURING ORIGINAL FICTION BY COLIN BAKER AND WENDY PADBURY

A Doctor Who Anthology

Published to benefit
The Foundation for the Study of Infant Death
and the Down's Syndrome Association

Edited by Mark Phippen and Shaun Lyon

Introduction by Peter Davison
Afterword by Sylvester McCoy
With Contributions from Colin Baker and Wendy Padbury
and over 100 professional & fan authors and artists

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Introduction

PETER DAVISON

I love science fiction. I can't get enough of it. From Asimov, through Dick, all the way to Wells, I have ploughed relentlessly on, enjoying every ion. I cleverly dodged Tolkien, skipped lightly over Peake (science fantasy-non!), never quite got into Pratchett, yet really pigged out on Adams (quite literally actually). I love science fiction.

I can't say I know much about the stories in this collection but I am quietly confident they will equal if not surpass those in my previously prefaced volume, the renowned and much sought after 'Peter Davison's Book of Alien Monsters," circa 1982. (You must remember it surely!) On that occasion as the title might indicate the book was a collection of my very favourite science fiction tales (In fact I was sent ten stories previously unknown to me, and told to choose nine. Yes it was fraud!), and jolly good stories they were. But of course not a patch on the pieces I set before you now. With literary giants the like of Colin Baker and Wendy Padbury how could this book possibly fail? In fact I feel sure that in time this book will certainly make its mark on the Library of Congress. Provided you throw it hard enough. And perhaps often enough.

Much as I love Colin, Wendy, Sylvester and all these folks, the reason these words are being written by me is because of my association with Down's Syndrome. At the 2000 Gallifrey Convention, the organisers were kind enough to donate the proceeds of the charity auction to this cause. I would like to thank everyone who donated items on that occasion and if I failed to thank them vociferously enough then, it was only because of after five hours of auctioning, I was feeling a little hoarse. (Any suggestion that in any previous incarnation I have felt a little horse is entirely true). So, thank you!

The Down's Syndrome Association is a charity dedicated to providing help, advice, and information to people, and families of

people with Down's Syndrome. Over the years it has greatly improved awareness of the problems, but more importantly, the potential that those with Downs Syndrome have. I became involved because my cousin Linda had Downs syndrome. She was born at a time when parents received no help of any kind, they were simply told to go home and make the best of it. So Linda received no formal education and very little in the way of specialised attention. She died a few years ago at the age of forty. By that time she was living in a home and had become increasingly frustrated by her inability to communicate with those around her. I wouldn't say her life was wasted, she was a great character and was greatly loved by her family, but had she been born a few enlightened years later then who knows?

I have worked with the Down's Syndrome Association for at least fifteen years, and over that time the level of achievement and personal fulfilment of those with this disability has improved dramatically. Many are able to live in the community and are successful at holding down jobs. The younger people are clear in speech, perfectly aware of their difficulties and determined to show what they can achieve. In so many areas, especially dance, drama, and the creative arts, many constantly confound expectations. I met one young man who over a lunchtime, recited the entire script of Caves of Androzani, playing all the parts, and providing the incidental music! It almost made me wonder why I bothered with the original. It's almost a cliché but it has to be said, that they are generous, loving, happy children and fully deserve a recognised place in society. The painful irony is that no family would wish to have a Down's Syndrome baby and that great strides are being made into early diagnosis.

However, I know that when these babies are born, given time to come to terms with it, the parents feel as any parent would, blessed to have that child.

Thank you for your support.

Peter Davison
United Kingdom

18 December 2000

About The Charities

The **Down's Syndrome Association** is an organization that raises awareness of and funds to combat Down's Syndrome, first identified by physician John Langdon Down in 1866. Down's Syndrome is not a disease, so it is inaccurate to say people suffer from it or that it can be treated. Down's Syndrome is a congenital disorder caused by an extra chromosome, thus giving the person a total of 47 chromosomes rather than the normal 46. The mental retardation seen in persons with Down's Syndrome is usually moderate, though in some it may be mild or severe. The cause of the chromosomal abnormalities in Down syndrome remains unknown. With modern medical care, most persons with this affliction live into adulthood. For more information on the Down's Syndrome Association, visit http://www.dsa-uk.com/ or write to the Down's Syndrome Association, 155 Mitcham Rd., London, SW17 9PG, UK.

Cot death is the sudden and unexpected death of a baby for no obvious reason. It can occur anywhere - not just in the cot. Babies can die suddenly and unexpectedly in prams, cars, beds or even someone's arms. There are no signs or warnings and no products available to prevent cot death. Fortunately, cot death is rare and never has there been a safer time to have a baby. However, eight babies every week in the UK still die as a cot death. More babies over one month of age die as cot deaths than from any other cause. The **Foundation for the Study of Infant Death** has funded over £8 million worth of research in hospitals and universities, and offer support to the families affected by this terrible tragedy, helping them come to terms with their loss and guiding them through the difficult times. For more information visit their website at http://www.sids.org.uk/fsid/. Colin Baker is Chairman of the Foundation.

Editor's Preface

MARK PHIPPEN & SHAUN LYON

You're wonderful. Did you know that?

Why? Because, by buying this book, you've helped two charities who *really* need your money.

But of course, you had a reason to buy this collection beyond giving money to charities, didn't you? There's a reason you bought this book rather than simply give the money to charity. You want to be entertained with stories of your favourite time travelling hero.

You won't be disappointed.

Missing Pieces has something for everyone. You'll find straightforward adventure tales, and psychological studies. There's subtle back stories and big revelations. There's rad and trad, funny and sad. It's a celebration of the past and a look into the future.

Whether you're a fan of *Doctor Who* on TV, in the books, or Big Finish's range of audio plays, or, like myself, you simply love *Doctor Who* in all its forms, you'll find something here for you.

So everybody wins.

Mark Phippen
Story Editor, *Missing Pieces*

I hope you're happy.

Really. You have reason to be. My co-editor and I certainly are. We first discussed doing this in the late spring of 2000, and while we thought we'd see some great stuff, we never dreamed that, nearly a year later, we'd see the end result now in your hands.

Missing Pieces is a collection of dreams, a collection of hours spent writing and illustrating and capturing imagination. Stories that fill in the gaps between televised adventures... that show us the tales behind the ones we know so well... that paint the final touch of light and shadow on the characters we love.

It was our goal at the very start to feature all eight television Doctors, and every single character considered almost universally to be a 'companion'. We very nearly accomplished that goal... the companions from the series, from the BBC and Virgin novel lines, from the Big Finish audio plays. The Master. Romana after she left the series. The Daleks, the Cybermen and the Time Lords. *Missing Pieces* has the very first bit of printed fiction featuring new Big Finish companion Charley Pollard, and a special. 'prequel' piece with new BBC books companion Anji Kapoor, both written by the writers who created them. We even managed to work the BBV universe into the fold, too.

But all of this would not have been possible without the support we received. Colin Baker, Peter Davison, Sylvester McCoy and Wendy Padbury... who would have imagined? Over 25 of the top *Doctor Who* novelists today... folks who sent us unpublished tales or stories written especially for this book. A panorama of the best fan fiction writers of our time, whose imaginations give us such wonders featured herein. A plethora of talented artists, whose renderings give image to our words.

In all, a collection Mark and I are proud of. A collection we hope will be remembered by *Doctor Who* fandom for years to come.

Thank you for your interest in *Missing Pieces*, and for your support of the Foundation for the Study of Infant Death and the Down's Syndrome Association. We hope you enjoy our work.

Shaun Lyon
Commissioning Editor/Publisher, *Missing Pieces*

Absent Friends

A few good wishes from a few good friends who sadly could not take part in Missing Pieces...

I haven't been able to contribute to this collection because I have no Doctor Who stories left, and Shaun (quite rightly) didn't want to use any of my songs. Fm not usually up for these charity collections. For me to be requires me to both care about the cause and want to please an old friend. That's the case here. So I thought I could write about the collection itself.

I've recently been presented with a Godson, of whom I'm very fond. He goose-steps up to me and slaps something covered with ick into my hand and says 'book!' I love him. And I know that, were anything to happen to him, I would be very hurt. But all of us who live at second-hand to children know- that there's something beyond that hurt, without really comprehending what that something is. To be the parent of a child, and to have that child die, especially in the terrible, seemingly offhand circumstances of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, must be the greatest possible pain to have to endure. Those of us who aren't parents simply can't understand it. Those who are can see it enough to be horribly afraid of it. Our continuing good wishes, then, should go to Colin Baker and his wife for turning a grief such as theirs into an ongoing good cause which helps many other people.

So that's one reason you should buy this fanzine. The other reason is to review the stories therein. Properly. Now, I've been assured by Shaun (and Mark) that this collection contains none of those 'director's cut' chapters from novels, the presentation of which to an audience is invariably an insult to the editor of the original book, who cut that stuff for a reason. (Having been guilty of such atrocities myself in the past I now erase all my previous drafts.) Also, the writers who have given of their material here are not seeking to glorify themselves, or somehow short-circuit the long, hard struggle up the ladder towards professional

work.

Above all, the stories in this volume have been selected from many more. Not everything was taken on. Writers have had material turned down. That's not always the case with charity anthologies, but it should be.

So. These folks should be reviewed properly. Because they deserve it.

You've all seen reviews of collections like this where you don't have to bother with the review paragraph itself. You can skip to the line at the end: 'It's all in a good cause, 9/10', or even '10/10' if the reviewer's feeling particularly hypocritical. What nonsense. If collections like these are going to, as they seem to be doing, take over from fan fiction fanzines, then they have to be peer reviewed in the same harsh light as is cast on any other fanzine. The writers involved deserve to have their craft, rather than their good intentions, judged and commented upon. The good ones need to hear praise. The bad ones need to get their arses kicked. That's how- writers improve. That's how we'll unblock the pipeline and get a new generation of Who talent into the professional arena. Nobody gets, a pass into the competition to write a Doctor Who book. But with tough editorial selection and tough reviewing, volumes such as this one can be a useful starter slope.

I hope you enjoy this collection, and share my appreciation of those who took the time and trouble to edit and contribute, and gave their work for free. But when you've read it, comment upon the stories in here as you would upon any other fanzine work. In ten years time, these writers, and the reading audience, will thank you for it.

PAUL CORNELL

Curses! My plans to be part of Missing Pieces have been foiled, by something as mundane as ill health. Congratulations to everyone who has contributed something to this worthwhile volume - and to you, the reader, for helping some good causes. Enjoy!

KATE ORMAN

Glad to see I'm not the only guilty party. Like Paul and Kate, writing commitments (namely my second Bernice Summerfield play, the preposterously titled Skymines of Karthos) have sadly kept me from completing "The Canvey Angels" for inclusion in this collection. Though I draw the line at thinking the lack of my story might stop you enjoying the others, I'm glad you're supporting the good causes benefiting from Missing Pieces by buying this zine anyway. (You are buying it, aren't you? If not, put it down right now, you miser.)

DAVID BAILEY

Aspects of Evil

Part One: The Journey Begins

CRAIG HINTON

The end of days. The end of *all* days.

'Here, mmm? I should have guessed,' the Doctor murmured, staring through the great doors. 'Sentimental old thing.' His cane tapping away, he stepped over the threshold of the TARDIS, trying to ignore the flaking paintwork and warped wood of the police box exterior. Old age screamed at him: the Chameleon Circuit had terminally failed centuries ago, and the outer plasmic shell itself was now breaking down, evaporating into the mathematical calculations of block transfer computation like so many half-thought ideas.

I know the feeling, thought the Doctor wryly. He had lost count of his exact age long ago, but he knew it ran into at least a couple of thousand years, if not more -- he had used up rather too many 500-year diaries for his liking.

If only the remarkable physiognomy of the Time Lords could allow him to ignore the consequences of that: his joints ached, his vision was blurred, and he needed to sleep more than once in a blue moon -- although he had seen his fair share of them in the past. Even his thought processes were sluggish: more than once in recent years, he had had to check co-ordinates with the navigation systems rather than relying on his now incomplete memory. He had even had to drag the Astral Map out of mothballs once or twice.

This incarnation had lasted longer than all of his previous ones put together -- though more through the luck of not having died yet, the Doctor had to grudgingly admit. But it had allowed him to live through events that he had never thought he would see: the Rutan-Sontaran Alliance; the terrifying secret of the Thals; the elevation of the Cybermen to godhood; the annihilation of the Chronovores at the hands of their brother Eternals... shocking revelations that somehow all made

a certain sense in the overall pattern of things. Now, at the end of his life, was he truly beginning to understand?

The end of his life.

He paused to catch his breath. Time Lords had many gifts, rooted in their special relationship with time. But perhaps the darkest of them was the inevitable knowledge of forthcoming regeneration. The lesser races, as many of his arrogant brethren called them, saw the Time Lord process of bodily renewal as a miracle. But it was death, again and again. For a Time Lord to regenerate, it was necessary for them to die. Old age, radiation poisoning, a broken back... even the sacrificial regenerations had required that ultimate step: few realised that the High Council's punishment for his interventions had not just been exile -- it had also been execution. And to become Time's Champion... The Doctor still shuddered at the memory of what that had taken from him.

Twelve transformations, twelve deaths. Sign-posted each time, Watcher or not. But this time the signpost pointed in a very different direction.

Rassilon had understood the lure of immortality, and how even the strongest of personalities would undoubtedly crack under its yoke -- the Doctor thought of Borusa and gave a sad sigh. When Rassilon had rewoven the tapestry of the Time Lord genome, the third strand had contained the ability to regenerate -- but only twelve times.

And the Doctor had already regenerated twelve times, that limit imposed by Rassilon himself. No more regenerations for him, only the undiscovered country, undiscovered even by the Time Lords. Even Time's Champion would have to admit defeat. But the Doctor didn't see it as defeat: he had accomplished so much, both as the Doctor and, in some way, as the Other. In one life he had helped found the Time Lords; in this one, he had made them live up to their responsibilities. More than an achievement for any mortal being.

But there were options.

And consequences.

As a Time Lord -- even one with such a chequered relationship to his own people -- the Doctor was entitled to a limited form of

immortality; a pattern of mental energy, alive forever in the ancient excitonic pathways of the Matrix. But how could he even consider that? Watching and waiting, but unable to do anything save lend his voice to the chorus of voices that were the Matrix? Such a dry and dusty existence ran counter to everything he had stood for over his long lives.

The other option was even more unthinkable: back to the Looms. The Other had done it -- why couldn't he? *Like forefather, like son*. Who knew what would be added if he tried that again? And by whom? No -- he would die as the Doctor, not as the result of some ancient Gallifreyan's twisted plot. At the very end, he would die with both finality and dignity. Which was why he had come here. To the Rose Garden.

Now, at the very, very end of his thirteenth and final incarnation, he had instructed the TARDIS to take him on one last journey. One last journey for the both of them. After all this time together, the symbiosis between them was almost tangible, a bond that only death would break. Indeed, the Doctor wasn't exactly sure *what* would happen to the TARDIS when he died. Would she die too? Even if she survived, how would she manage without the captain at the helm?

And that was why the Doctor had indulged the TARDIS one last time: because it might also be her last journey as well.

Which made their current location especially poignant. The Rose Garden. Their great secret. And yet the Doctor had to admit that their location hadn't come as too much of a surprise: where else could it have been?

A place to which no-one else was privy.

His home.

Over the millennia, people had frequently spoken of his love affair with Earth, but the Rose Garden held an even more special place in his hearts. If Earth was the love affair, the Rose Garden was the marriage.

The Doctor took a rasping breath of the fragrant air, his rheumy eyes looking out across the expanse of the Rose Garden. It was as beautiful as ever. He closed his eyes for a second, the knowledge that this was his last evening in the Garden - his last evening *ever* --

momentarily overwhelming him. It was *beautiful*. He had seen so many sights, some magnificent, some magnificent in their horror. But he was glad that the Rose Garden would be the last thing he ever saw. Glad -- and relieved at the TARDIS's choice. It was a good way to go. He made his way to one of the many benches and sat down, exhausted at the effort. He smiled. And remembered.

There - the ornate topiary, with its varying selection of griffins and unicorns, Daleks and Quarks -- *and it did a very good Zarbi. Although the Stalagtron was a bit dodgy, all things considered.* The elaborate maze that defied all the known laws of topology, responding to his emotions and allowing him to lose himself for as long as he wanted -- *and he had lost an entire year in the maze grieving for Andrew, sacrificing himself to prevent the Sentient TARDIS War. So many wars, so many sacrifices.* The rich beds and tall trellises of roses, petals painted in all possible --

As the Doctor faces his final destiny, the last few missing pieces of his lives slot into place...

and impossible -- colours -- *how could he forget falling back against that trellis in despair? The tears had rolled down his face when Jo left him, the fledgling flying the coop.* The gazebo, its always fresh paint glinting in the afternoon sun, its interior far larger than the wooden exterior would allow -- *sounds familiar. And yet it was there that he had considered the darkest of thoughts, unable to accept Cyberlord Brant's apology for Natasha 's death. How could his eleventh incarnation even have considered genocide?*

He shook his head to clear the memories. Natasha, Andrew, Adric,

Katarina, Kamelion... in a way, this Garden was a memorial to them all. Indeed, it held memorials for them all. He turned his attention back to the Rose Garden, where a distant susurration attracted his attention. How could he have forgotten the apiary? Bees that never stung, honey that the gods would have fought for...

And is there honey still for tea? Dear Rupert's words referred to a utopia, the world everyone remembered in nostalgia-tinted hindsight. But the Rose Garden was the world he remembered. The world where it was always ten to three. The world that he called home. He painfully rose to his feet and stepped onto the winding path across the lawn: the mown green lawn, its variegated stripes of cropped green heading for the horizon -- *how many times had he tried to reach the bottom of the garden, only to fail? Was that the key to everything? How had old Tennyson put it?* He quoted the poem to no-one in particular -- mainly because there was no-one in particular there anyway. Ever.

'We are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are. One equal temper of heroic hearts, Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will. To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.' But now it was time to yield. He had found all that he wanted over the millennia. And now, finally, he was here, in the Rose Garden. *Home*,

Home. 'An interesting concept, isn't it?' he muttered. 'What constitutes a home, eh? Where you are born? Who you are born as? What you will become?'

Becoming philosophical in your old age, Doctor? King Dalios of Atlantis had called him a philosopher, but he had dismissed it as polite court pleasantries. But perhaps philosophy was all he could cling onto now. He thought of the greatest Gallifreyan book on the subject, *The Rhyme and Reason of Rassilon*, required reading as a Time-Tot. What was it Rassilon had said? *You are born, you die, and something happens in the middle.*

But it wasn't quite that simple if you were born twice, was it?

Because within him, at the very core of his being, he held the genetic inheritance of another -- *the* Other, one of the Triumvirate of Gallifreyans who had founded Time Lord society, only to flee what he

had created and fling himself into the genetic Looms that kept the Gallifreyan heritage alive. His essence, his *soul*, had passed through the Looms from generation to generation, genome to genome, until it finally found the Time Lord family whose black sheep could give him life once more.

The Doctor's family.

Burning within him, the drives and passions of the Other had always defined his life. And for most of his life he had been the unwitting -- but perhaps not unwilling -- puppet, his actions, his ethics, his very personality laid down before he had ever been born. Thanks to the Other, the Doctor had played all of his roles once again: the Grandfather, the Clown, the Dandy, the Bohemian, the Child, the Maverick, Time's Champion, the Innocent, the Imp, the Scientist, the Explorer and the Warlock. And now he was back where he had begun. He was the Grandfather once more -- ignoring a certain other Grandfather that he had finally defeated, at a cost so high that even now he tried not to remember. But he wasn't just Susan's grandfather -- he was now the Grandfather of the entire universe.

And the universe knew it. Once the Doctor's imminent demise had become common knowledge -- the cosmic grapevine at its most efficient -- the tributes and offers had poured in, people and races who wanted to honour the Doctor's achievements.

Achievements? He had only done what he thought was right.

Gallifrey had urged his return: Lord President Valerian had offered a full state funeral and interment in the Mausoleum of Rassilon -- *their politically correct makeover of the Dark Tower* -- and a place in the highest echelons of the Matrix. The Sontaran-Rutan CloneHost had suggested that he donate his TNA to their genetic pool, while the Cyberlords had asked whether the Doctor would grace their gestalt with his mind. Even the Minyans -- who considered him a god -- wanted to raise statues to him on every world in their republic, from Minyos II to the Eclectic Wastelands. And there were so many, many more, thousands upon thousands of races, all of them offering a form of immortality.

But he didn't want immortality! He wanted to rest, to put it all behind

him. Hadn't he done enough? He was tired, he was old...

And he was rambling: far too common nowadays. What had he been thinking about earlier? Ah yes -- *home*.

What constituted a home?

Where he had lived on Gallifrey? The Other had had a vast and unruly estate just outside what would become the Capitol, close enough to wield his political power without showing his hand, while the Doctor's family had lived in the madness of Lungbarrow, the house of so many, many secrets. But were either of them ever home? *No. If either had been home, why had he been so desperate to escape -- on both occasions?*

What about Earth? He had lived there in so many eras and locations -- the houses in Kent and Thisis in the twentieth century and beyond, the Chateau in the Swiss Alps during the French Revolution, the Hermitage in Ancient Greece, and all the other times and places that he had tried to put down roots. But were any of them home? *Remember -- Earth was an affair, a series of heady trysts. Hadn't he spent his entire exile trying to get away from the place!*

And of course, he had always had the transcendental interior of the TARDIS to rely on -- apart from the time spent with Compassion, and the following amnesiac century that he had spent wandering the Earth in his eighth incarnation, learning how to live... and how to love...

And lost all sense of who he was.

But had any of those places ever truly been home?

No. In his hearts of hearts, there had always been somewhere else. Somewhere that he truly could call *home*.

The Rose Garden.

The Rose Garden had been the Doctor's private place ever since he had discovered it, soon after he and Susan had fled Gallifrey. The first time he had landed there, purely by accident, he had been delighted at its beauty, its calm, the way it completed him... and it had been a heavy hand that had activated the dematerialisation controls, the Doctor convinced that his erratic Ship would never find it again.

He was wrong. Despite his frequent inability to steer the Ship, he had always managed to find the Rose Garden, time and time again:

indeed, it was if he had been *supposed* to find it. Or perhaps the Rose Garden had been supposed to find him.

But only him.

The universe was rich with wonders -- he knew that, probably more than anyone else alive. For so many centuries, he had marvelled at its delights, more than willing to share it with so many, many friends. He had lost count of the number of companions he had taken to the Eye of Orion, with its calming, soothing properties. Or to the Halls of Mount Aeternis, where the air was like nectar and the food was prepared by the gods themselves. To the Rainbow Pillars of Hercules on the Rim of Twilight, overlooking the very edge of reality. Planets of wonder and majesty, delights to be shared with his long-suffering friends.

But none of his countless companions had ever set foot on the manicured lawns of the Rose Garden, seen its maze, fished in the stream, or relaxed in the gazebo. Indeed, none of them even knew about it -- even Susan had been ordered to stay in her room within the TARDIS whenever the Doctor felt the need to return there. And as for dear Jo Grant... what a palaver that had been! That girl had never known how to keep her nose out of trouble!

Ironically, of course, it had been the Rose Garden from which he had been taken by both the High Council and Borusa's timescoop, on two of those occasions in which the First Law of Time had been chucked in the bin. How had they found him there, of all places? Just one of those great mysteries, he supposed.

But it was as if the Rose Garden needed him in some way -- needed him all to itself. And in return, the Doctor needed the Rose Garden. In many ways, it was the only thing that had saved his soul.

And it appeared to be a monogamous relationship. It did seem as if no-one at all had ever been there apart from him: every time that the TARDIS had landed there, the Doctor had been completely alone. The mystery of who maintained the lawns, the maze, the roses and the bees had never been explained. Nor had the fact that it was always a warm late summer's afternoon, just before dusk, whenever he arrived. And he had never ever seen it rain, despite the lushness of the greenery and roses.

The whole thing was impossible. But the Doctor preferred it that way. There were certain aspects of the universe that it was better not to understand.

Understanding.

Over the millennia, the Rose Garden had been the place that he had come to in order to understand, where he had reflected upon those experiences that had threatened to overwhelm him, to undermine him. Everyone expected him to be the one who chased the monsters away. What about those times when the monsters were chasing him?

Once again, he looked around the Rose Garden, the memories and the pain flooding back. Self-indulgence had never been one of his strong suits, but now, at the very end, it was one of the few pleasures he still had left. Standing here, he could remember everything: a millennia of memories that would never be told, never be confessed. The memories that made him the Doctor. And on his last night, he had to remember them once more. *To keep them alive.*

Once again, the memories presented themselves in every corner of the Rose Garden. The ivy-clad gazebo, where he had mourned the loss of Adric, cursing those laws of time that had condemned the boy.

The wooden bench that sat on the banks of the small salmon stream, where the decision he had made for Susan after the Dalek invasion of Earth had misted his eyes.

The catacombs that lay beneath the Rose Garden, where he had lost himself -- after almost losing himself on ancient Skaro at the behest of the Time Lords, their mission at odds with his very moral code.

The marble memorials to Katarina, Susan and Kamelion, not to mention those for Natasha, Yuri and Andrew, and all the others who had fallen as part of his moral crusade.

A veritable graveyard of companions, their lives sacrificed in the cause of moral duty. And what about his ethics? Had they been sacrificed because of his moral duty? The Doctor mopped his brow with his handkerchief.

Moral? How moral had he been? What sort of a prime directive had he been following? People had *died* under his patronage, his

protection, died to save his vision of the universe. Who was he to be the cosmos' moral compass? *Who?*

The Doctor wasn't quite ready for *that* sort of retrospection. The memories were bad enough: every square metre of the Rose Garden was a memorial to a moment of his life, whether he was proud of the moment or not.

ARE YOU PROUD OF YOUR LIFE, DOCTOR? PROUD OF WHAT YOU HAVE ACHIEVED?

The voice was as unexpected as it was unwelcome. Rich and deep. But not attractive. It was steeped in far too much blood for that.

'You!' he hissed. 'I had hoped that I had seen the last of your perfidy.'

The Black Guardian of Time, the Guardian of Darkness in Time. *He Who Walks in Darkness*. He was standing next to the sundial, his form cloaked in robes of impenetrable blackness, his cruel face twisted in a rictus of false familiarity.

I AM CONSTANT AS THE NORTHERN STAR.

And another voice: this one full of the wisdom of ages.

AS AM I.

A kindly looking old man in a crumpled linen suit was leaning against the rose trellis, raising a glass of some green drink to the Doctor. *Crumpled linen suit -- is that where I got the idea?*

He was supposed to represent good, order, structure. But he was as equally unwelcome here on this, the last day: the White Guardian, the Guardian of Light in Time. *He Who Walks in Light*.

The Doctor looked from one to the other, from hawk to dove. 'Why are you here?' he spat. 'I don't want you here, at this time, in this place. Give me some dignity.'

DIGNITY. AN INTERESTING CONCEPT. WE AWAIT YOUR DEFINITION, said the White Guardian.

ALTHOUGH WE COULD PROBABLY GUESS, countered the Black Guardian. **WE ARE ALL SUCH CLOSE FRIENDS.**

The Doctor turned his back on them, furious with their presumption. Over the last few years, he had said his goodbyes: he had travelled from Earth to Gallifrey to the Eye of Orion and beyond, seeing those

people who meant so much to him. But now, in the Rose Garden... Didn't he deserve to say goodbye to *himself*?

Not that there was anything he could do about it, he had to admit; the Black and White Guardians represented a full third of the Six-Fold God, the Council of Guardians which sat near the very pinnacle of reality. They wielded powers that even the Doctor had trouble comprehending -- and he had seen them in action far too many times for his own liking. But, deep down, he also knew that it was his own fault. Because he had tried to *understand*.

On far too many occasions, the Doctor had had cause to rue the day that he and the others of the Deca had dared to explore the realm of the Guardians, only to attract their lifelong attention. They had thought that they were doing the right thing... their *moral duty*...

Ever since the Deca's fateful decision to invade the darker strata of the Time Vortex in search of the deeper mysteries of time, the Guardians had embroiled the Doctor and his fellow renegades in their cosmic shenanigans time and time again: for the Doctor, it had been the Quest for the Key to Time, the Eternal Games, the Mystery of the Thousand Earths and the Question of the Final Question. He had even detected their hand in the incident with the Quantum Archangel, hiding like shadows at every turn while the Doctor and his associates had just about managed to save the cosmos.

As for the others of the Deca -- well, the Master, the Rani. Drax and Mortimus... the Doctor knew that he had been very lucky. There was a good reason why the Master had used up all of his regenerations by the time that the Doctor was still on his fourth, and the truth of that still haunted him.

Regenerations. Age. Death. The Rose Garden.

In those days he had been young, full of potential, full of fight. Determined and obstinate enough to face up to these two wannabe-gods; determined and obstinate enough to give them some sport to entertain their endless days. Determined and obstinate enough to face up to a force of nature.

But now? After all this time?

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will. To strive, to seek,

to find, and not to yield. He was dying now -- he had *yielded*. So what could they possibly want from him now? There was no fight left in him, not any more. And, most importantly of all, he had come here to die, not to take place in yet another of their tournaments. What sport could he possibly give them now?

WE HAVE COME TO PAY TRIBUTE TO OUR MOST VALIANT OF FOES, explained the White Guardian.

Foe? The Doctor stopped and turned to face them. 'What are you talking about?'

AND OUR MOST VALIANT OF SERVANTS. The Black Guardian bowed his head. **YOU HAVE OUR ETERNAL GRATITUDE**.

The Doctor shook his head, waving his cane at the White Guardian at the same time. 'Foe? I have always followed your path, Old One.' And you -- the cane was now pointed at the Black Guardian's head. 'I have never been your servant.' He shot him a look of disgust. 'The very thought appals me.'

With a blatant -- and quite deliberate -- disregard for the primal energies that seethed behind him, the Doctor resumed his journey towards the gazebo. Even though one third of the Six-Fold God could utterly destroy him, he was too old to be frightened by their *Christmas Carol* chains and groans, their veiled and not so veiled threats. But he stopped when the Black Guardian addressed him, his voice echoing across the Rose Garden.

You SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND, DOCTOR, THROUGHOUT YOUR MANY LIVES. YOU SOUGHT, AND YOU DEMONSTRATED SOME SUCCESS. BUT THERE ARE DEEPER TRUTHS, TRUTHS THAT YOU COULD NEVER HAVE DIVINED. PERHAPS IT IS TIME THAT WE GAVE YOU THAT UNDERSTANDING, SHOWED YOU THOSE TRUTHS, SO THAT YOU MAY PASS INTO THE NEXT REALM PREPARED FOR WHAT YOU WILL ENCOUNTER.

The Doctor finally turned round. 'What next realm? I'm dying. I didn't know that the Guardians of Time believed in heaven.' And then memories unbidden forced him to make an amendment.

'Or hell.'

WE ALL CREATE OUR OWN HELLS, DOCTOR. OF ALL

PEOPLE, YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT, the White Guardian retorted.

His last day.

And his last confession.

He is the amalgamation of the darker sides of your nature, Doctor, somewhere between your twelfth and final incarnations. And may I say that you do not improve with age.

The Valeyard.

It was an ancient term, dating back to the Old Times, the Dark Times, times that had demanded a harsher judiciary. The translation of the word in Modern Gallifreyan was anodyne, harmless: *Learned Court Prosecutor*.

But the Doctor spoke Old High Gallifreyan, the language of his forefathers. And he had always known the exact translation of *Valeyard*.

The Bastard in the Mirror.

The bastard offspring and the final insult. But it still led to the darkest question of all: did the Valeyard have to exist in order to allow the Doctor *his* life?

Valeyard, Bastard... The dark cancer that had gnawed away at his Sixth Incarnation, that had forced the Champion's Sacrifice that had borne and born his Seventh, and that had finally seen birth at the appointed hour.

It was on the planet Skaro...

In the Throneroom, before the Emperor itself, at the very heart of his enemy's stronghold.

Despite the heavy presence of the Guardians awaiting some response, some acknowledgement, the Doctor allowed himself -- indulged himself -- to remember...

There, his twelfth incarnation bound and broken on the floor after the Dalek Supreme had forced him to kneel before the beige and gold casing of the Emperor.

The ultimate abasement.

Black Daleks encircled him, guns trained, while the Red Daleks ensconced in their balconies incited the blue Daleks above them in the dark-domed auditorium to scream for the death of the *Ka Faraq Gatri* -

- The Destroyer of Worlds, the Bringer of Darkness.

And the darkness was about to arrive.

Antithesis: a Time Lord whose race had held sway over time and space, and a tyrant whose cyborg race desired that above all else. Doctor and Emperor, each the quintessence and embodiment of their race. *But were they truly that different?*

Above the metallic din of the Dalek *hoi polloi*, the Doctor and the Emperor argued for one last time. The Dalek Civil War; the resurrection of Davros; the Thal War; the Jihad for the Key to Time... Hours passed as they bartered logic and emotion, a trial the like of which the universe had never seen.

But, as in all trials, there had to be a verdict, and a verdict was finally passed.

The Daleks won.

And in short order, sentence was duly passed.

It was on the planet Skaro...

They say he listened calmly...

It was a request they should never have granted.

The final, fatal shot from the Dalek Supreme.

It was on the planet Skaro...

In the Throneroom, before the Emperor itself at the very heart of his enemy's stronghold.

The Doctor died.

Again.

But death was not an option: the blessed curse of regenesis engulfed him, empowering every cell to rebel and renew.

It feels different this time.

It was as if his soul were being split in two. Every memory, every thought, every waking hour... duplicated. Borne and born into another. As his new body had crusted over him, he had been far too aware that he was not alone there. A glance to the left, through brand new eyes, proved the nightmare.

The Bastard in the Mirror.

The Valeyard.

There, lying next to him.

Two Doctors from one, yet not good and evil -- nothing so banal or simplistic. It was a matter of different checks, different balances, a man of wisdom and a learned court prosecutor. Both believing themselves to be right. Now facing one another at the very heart of their greatest enemy's empire.

It should have been a fitting end to a battle that had lasted throughout half of his incarnations. A final duel, a duel involving two of the Doctor's greatest adversaries -- not that the Master or the Chaplain of Spite could have attended anyway, given *their* particular fates.

There, at the very beginning of that final incarnation, he had finally had the self-confidence to face down his dark twin, determined to consign him to oblivion. The two of them, fighting for the right to be *the* Doctor.

How careless, then, that the Daleks had left the door to their DARDIS open, and within sprinting distance. As the Court of Skaro span and whirled in confusion, he dragged his dark twin with him, throwing himself into that poor imitation of a TARDIS, running to the control panel on the wall and locking the Daleks out.

It was time to go. Sending the DARDIS spinning in flight, he turned on his new brother.

The Valeyard. The Bastard in the Mirror.

They fought for a century. Games upon games upon games, played through the transcendental interior of the DARDIS.

But, as in all games, there had to be a winner, and a winner was finally declared. Even with the Daleks' rudimentary grasp of time travel, the Doctor managed to hurl the Valeyard into the Darker Strata, to the very depths of the Time Vortex.

It took the Doctor another century to return to his own TARDIS, but he returned to his best friend content that he had banished his nemesis once and for all.

He was wrong. The banishment hadn't lasted forever, as the Doctor eventually learnt to his cost.

Time and again, throughout his final incarnation, the Doctor and the Valeyard had fought one another: on Mars, where the Valeyard had allied with the Sceptic Caste of the Ice Warriors; on Dominus, where

he had used the Quarks' Giant Wasps to attack the TARDIS; on Earth, where he had sought to incite the Earth Reptiles to shoot down the Moon...

Time and again, the Valeyard had intersected the Doctor's life. And time and again, the Doctor had defeated him. Daleks, Heracletes, Cybermen, Stalagtrons, Ice Warriors, Plath... allies for the Valeyard, enemies for the Doctor. Forget the Master, forget the Chaplain of Spite. Even forget the Daleks. Throughout his thirteenth incarnation, there had only been one nemesis for the Doctor. Until their final encounter.

Back there again. *How fitting*. Under the stormy skies of the planet Skaro, in the midst of the Petrified Forest, the Doctor and the Valeyard had finally faced one another. His list of evil crimes was endless -- but an end was what was required.

They had fought, both mentally and physically. On the astral plane, they had been two armoured warriors, fighting to the death. In reality, they had been two Time Lords -- the *same* Time Lord -- fighting the same battle. Vicious, personal. *Intense*.

The result had been the same on both planes. *Victory. Victory for the Doctor*. The Doctor had been prepared: the Valeyard was an anomaly, a *paradox*... And there was only one way to deal with a paradox: to make it face up to its uncertain presence, to realise its non-existence... And watch it wither and die.

Surrounded by the dead forest of his greatest enemy's legacy, the Doctor had watched as the Valeyard himself had withered and died, his remains blown away in the wind.

A touch of the Grandfather Paradoxes, to be sure, but he had faced *that* abomination as well -- and won. The Valeyard was a stain on the cosmos -- a stain on him. And if anyone had the right to remove him from history, it was the Doctor.

Unbelievably, the collateral benefits had been immense: somehow, the loss of the Valeyard had undermined the entire Dalek timeline, ensuring that they had never existed. His moral dilemma was finally answered: the universe *was* better without the Daleks.

The entire universe had shuddered with that one, ripples and eddies

and tsunamis battering reality. Timelines had crashed, and -- with a fitting turn of irony -- it had restored the timeline of Gallifrey. The catastrophe that had destroyed the planet of the Time Lords had miraculously been undone, allowing Great Gallifrey to come back into existence, recreating that shining jewel in Kasterborous.

Even better, they had been *proper* Time Lords, a race of supreme ethics and unlimited morality. The race that he had envisioned as the Other, the race that he had yearned for as the Doctor. A race that used its great powers, whilst knowing that with great power came great responsibility.

It was all a fitting epitaph to the greatest mistake of his lives.

'An afterlife?' he demanded, remembering what they had been talking about. 'Is that what you're promising me?'

THERE COULD BE MORE, said the White Guardian.

IF YOU DESIRE IT, added the Black.

'What more could I want?' The Doctor bent down and took in the fragrance of a blue rose. He decided to adopt a less sarcastic tone. These two may not have been gods, but the difference was infinitesimal. 'I have had a charmed life, my lords. I have seen each and every one of my incarnations make a difference to this universe.' He painfully straightened up. 'I have increased the quantity of good in this universe -- tipped the balance, so to speak.' Then he pointed the cane. 'Tipped it in *your* direction, if I may be so bold,' he snapped at the White Guardian.

The Guardian of Light in time glanced at his dark companion. The Guardian of Darkness gave an almost imperceptible nod.

BOLD -- BUT WRONG, DOCTOR. The White Guardian raised an eyebrow. **WHY DO YOU THINK YOU WERE BLESSED WITH YOUR DOPPELGANGER?**

'What?' The question was unexpected -- and unwelcome. 'Too many transgressions of the Laws of Time, perhaps?'

The White Guardian walked over to him, his radiance washing over the roses. He leant forward, and whispered in the Doctor's ear.

BECAUSE I WANTED MY *OWN* DOCTOR.

The Doctor felt the blood drain from his face. 'You wanted what?

You mean - *you're* to blame for that, that... abomination!' He felt himself needing the support of his cane. *This just didn't make sense!*

AS I SAID - I WANTED MY OWN DOCTOR. Too MUCH OF YOUR TIME WAS SPENT IN *HIS* THRALL. The White Guardian gestured towards his black-garbed counterpart. **YOU WERE HIS AGENT - AND I NEEDED MINE. SO I CREATED THE VALEYARD FROM YOUR DARKEST NIGHTMARES, FROM YOUR FORBIDDEN THOUGHTS, YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS AND CONSCIOUS VICES. A MAN OF SUCH INTEGRITY, OF SUCH *MORALS*... BUT CAPABLE OF HARBOURING SUCH TERRIBLE, TERRIBLE EVIL**. He held his palm out, and an image of the Valeyard appeared. **EVIL THAT I COULD HARNESS AND USE IN MY CRUSADE.**

This was all too much for the Doctor. Wheezing, he staggered over to the nearest bench and sat down heavily. 'As you have said, I sought understanding. But this... I just don't understand!'

The Guardians were standing before him. But their expressions were kindly, indulgent. For a moment, he was young Theta Sigma again, once more at the rough end of a sardonic lambasting from Cardinal Borusa. *Have you not understood a single word that I have said?*

Then he was back in the Rose Garden.

Dying.

The White Guardian spoke first. **You ARE A MAN OF MORALS, DOCTOR**.

The Black: **OF ETHICS.**

White: **OF JUSTICE.**

Black: **IN YOUR EYES, THE UNIVERSE IS BLACK AND WHITE**.

And together: **AS ARE WE.**

It felt like another trial. 'You are the White and Black Guardians of Time. Good and Evil, the eternal balance. All of my actions have been with good intent! There have been miscalculations, mistakes, I admit that. Maradnias, Xoanon's World, the fall of the Concordance... But my intentions --'

THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS, DOCTOR, the Black Guardian interrupted.

AND WE ALL KNOW YOUR PERSONAL DEFINITION OF HELL, repeated the White.

'Please -- will you explain all of this?' The Doctor felt weak, dizzy, confused. As his entire belief structure began to collapse, his imminent death became ever more imminent. One of his hearts had stopped beating, and the other was thumping, thumping, thumping... He could just about hear them above the roaring in his chest.

THE UNIVERSE IS NOT BLACK AND WHITE, DOCTOR.

WE ARE BOTH.

AND NEITHER.

AND WE ARE NOT GOOD AND EVIL.

WE ARE BOTH.

AND NEITHER.

Darkness was closing in around the edges of his vision. His breathing was erratic, laboured. *It was the end... But how could he have prepared for this moment?*

The Black Guardian laid a gloved hand on his shoulder.

WHEN YOUR RACE WAS YOUNG, IT WAS PROUD AND IDEALISTIC. IT SOUGHT TO FIND ITS PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE. INSTEAD, IT FOUND US.

The White Guardian took a sip of his drink before taking up the story. **THEY FOUND THE SIX-FOLD GOD, THE ULTIMATE DESTINY OF ANOTHER TIME LORD RACE. SIX TIME LORDS, A HIGH COUNCIL OF A VERY DIFFERENT GALLIFREY IN A VERY DIFFERENT UNIVERSE. SIX TIME LORDS, ATTACHED TO THE MATRIX, PASSING THROUGH THE DEATH OF ONE UNIVERSE AND ARRIVING IN THE NEXT.**

CHANGED.

'I know all of this,' gasped the Doctor. 'Or have you forgotten the Question of the Final Question? You *wanted* me to know this.'

Perhaps they answered in turn. Perhaps they answered together. He didn't know, he didn't care. He just wanted to --

WE WANTED YOU TO *UNDERSTAND* YOUR ERROR. YOU DID NOT.

YOU ASSIGNED ROLES TO US. ROLES DERIVED FROM YOUR

OWN MORALITY.

WE HAVE NO MORALITY.

WE SIMPLY ARE.

WE HOLD SWAY OVER THE UNIVERSE, DOCTOR, ENSURING ITS INTEGRITY. BLACK, WHITE, AZURE, CRYSTAL, RUBY AND GOLD. ENTROPY, STRUCTURE, EQUILIBRIUM, DREAMS, ETHICS AND LIFE. THE SIX PILLARS UPON WHICH THIS COSMOS RESTS.

White: **I AM STRUCTURE.**

Black: **AND I AM ENTROPY.**

BUT WE ARE *NOT* GOOD AND EVIL. THAT IS THE PROVINCE OF THE RUBY GUARDIAN OF JUSTICE AND MORALITY. HE WHO BALANCES THE SOULS.

'Structure? Entropy?' Even this close to death, the Doctor sought understanding. Unfortunately, he was beginning to understand. 'Evil can impose structure, while good can cause chaos...' Understanding hit him like a number 22 to Putney Green.

'The Daleks!'

THE DALEKS, repeated the Black Guardian.

ON ANCIENT SKARO, YOU WEIGHED THEIR LIVES AND FOUND THEM NECESSARY.

NOW YOU KNOW THAT THEY WERE NOT.

HAD THEY SUCCEEDED IN THEIR AIMS, THEY WOULD HAVE CONQUERED THE UNIVERSE.

IMPOSING STRUCTURE.

The Black Guardian gently squeezed the Doctor's shoulder. He hardly felt it. His ties to the Rose Garden, his ties to the mortal world, were slipping.

I COULD NOT ALLOW THAT. I SENT YOU TO SKARO IN YOUR FIRST INCARNATION, TO ENCOUNTER THAT WHICH YOU WOULD ALREADY KNOW. I SENT YOU TO SKARO IN YOUR FOURTH INCARNATION -- ON BOTH OCCASIONS -- TO ENSURE THAT THEIR CREATOR WOULD LIVE TO DESTROY THEM.

AND BEFORE - IT WAS I WHO PERSUADED THE OTHER TO

TRUST HIS CHANCES TO THE LOOM, KNOWING THAT HIS KNOWLEDGE WOULD BECOME INCUBATED WITHIN YOU, DOCTOR, THAT HIS HERITAGE WOULD LIVE ON. AND I SUBSEQUENTLY BENT YOUR TIMELINE TO ENSURE THAT YOU DEFEATED THE DALEKS AT EVERY JUNCTURE.

It just wasn't possible -- and yet the Doctor that knew it was. And he understood Finally. His life now ebbing, he finally understood.

'But it wasn't just the Daleks, was it? I suppose that it isn't a coincidence that all of the races I have fought repeatedly have wanted to impose order? The Cybermen, the Sontarans, the Quarks... even the Chaplain of Spite and his Church of the Paracletes -- all of them would have created structure in the universe. Even the Master...' His rheumy eyes opened wide. 'How could I have been so blind?'

DO NOT CHIDE YOURSELF, said the White Guardian.

FOR THERE ARE MANY ASPECTS OF EVIL, countered the Black.

YOU FINALLY UNDERSTAND.

THAT IS GOOD.

PERFECT.

PERFECT FOR OUR NEEDS.

'What needs?' gasped the Doctor. 'Why did you come here, now? To gloat? To hurt an old man in his last hours? To destroy everything he's ever, believed in?' A tear rolled down the Doctor's wrinkled cheek. 'Have you no pity?'

WE DO NOT HAVE PITY, DOCTOR.

WE HAVE RESPECT. RESPECT FOR YOU AND RESPECT FOR THE TRUTH.

WE ALSO HAVE NEED.

'Then tell me!' the Doctor screamed.

YOU HAVE UNDERSTANDING.

NOW YOU WILL HAVE ENLIGHTENMENT.

The Black Guardian's gloved hands were no longer empty. A blinding, coruscating jewel filled his palms, a universe sparkling within its depths.

Enlightenment.

He had first seen it onboard, the *SS Shadow*, as Black and White

had tempted Turlough at the end of their perverted tournament. He had been standing there, looking confident, confident that Turlough would make the right decision. And inside, he had been desperately hoping that his instincts had been correct.

It had been the prize on another occasion, as Eternals and Chronovores sought to solve the Mystery of the Thousand Earths - a prize that neither side would live to claim. The Doctor and Yuri had only just escaped the Vortex Rupture that the Transcendental Beings had caused. And what about the audacious plan of the Living Stars and their Galaxy of Pain? Hadn't that required the combination of the Arc of Infinity and Enlightenment? Just to create a neural network greater than the Mad Mind of Bophemeral. Pathetic.

And those were just the obvious ones, the ones that had shouted out at him. So many other times it had lurked on the edges of an adventure, just out of sight, a malevolent presence that turned and twisted, the tempt and the lure for so many, many lost souls.

Enlightenment. The ultimate answer to all of the ultimate questions. Carved from the same unearthly material as the Key to Time and the Crystal of Kronos, Enlightenment had the capacity to give form to one's deepest desires, one's deepest needs. And, to be frank, it terrified him. He had seen his deepest fears, faced them, defeated them. But he just couldn't face seeing his deepest desires. He simply couldn't -- wouldn't --

YOU REJECTED ENLIGHTENMENT ONCE BEFORE, DOCTOR, said the White Guardian.

THE TIME HAS COME TO ACCEPT IT. TO ACCEPT YOUR DESTINY. The Black Guardian thrust it towards him.

'No!'

TAKE IT.

The Doctor shrank back from the burning diamond, even though it was tugging at his soul, promising everything he had ever desired, everything he could ever have desired.

TAKE IT!

From their position near the top of the cosmic hierarchy. the Guardians demanded respect. It was as if it had been programmed

into every living being.

The Doctor was no exception.

Almost instinctively, he grasped Enlightenment, clutching it to his chest, allowing its radiance to warm him. He felt its primal power seeping into him, seeping into his mind and his memories.

The Doctor had lived for thousands of years. He had seen the birth of Time Lord civilisation. He had seen it destroyed, never to have existed. And he had been responsible for recreating it. He had seen the majesty and wonder of the universe, and he had seen all of the darkness that it had to offer. So many worlds, so many times, so many memories.

As the Enlightenment of the Guardians - the Enlightenment of the universe itself -- bathed every cell in his body, it sought those memories. Some were close to the surface, brought there by the Doctor as he had strolled the Rose Garden for the last time. Others were buried deeper. And others still had been forgotten. In the last moments of his life, the Doctor quite literally saw his entire life -- his lives -- laid out before him, a tapestry of success and failure, joy and wonder and horror and hatred...

And finally, at the end of days, he truly *understood*...

Letting Go

Jim Catapano

He was aware that he had fallen. There was a dull ache on his forehead where it had hit the floor. Though his body was inert, his mind continued to function. He struggled to maintain some semblance of consciousness.

He didn't know where he had been or who had been with him, nor the reason for his collapse. He had a sickening feeling that it had been simply the failing of his own ancient body. *Not yet. Please, not yet.*

'Coldest place on earth.' The phrase came to him like a wave, rushing up to the front of his mind and then receding again before he could discern anything from it. Had he said this himself at some point?

There were sounds. Faint sounds of people talking. Two voices, male and female. He tried to focus his mind on them. If he followed their conversation, perhaps it would unlock his memory, help him remember where he was. He strained to find meaning in the words.

'...can't leave him.' The woman's voice.

'Seems all right.' The man, replying. 'Pulse and breathing are normal.'

They were talking about him. Steven and... no, Steven was gone. Ben. That was it, of course. He tried to say the boy's name out loud, then realised with dismay that his body wouldn't allow it.

'...just seems to be worn out.' Polly. Yes, yes, the child is all too right. Have been overdoing things a little. Need to rest, then I'll be good as new...

Good as new. This is the end, isn't it?

The voices were gone. The Doctor couldn't tell if his companions had actually left his side, or if he was simply slipping deeper into unconsciousness. Or worse.

He had feared the change for some time. He first felt it when the delusions of youth crashed down, when his body began to betray him, cruelly revealing that it was not indestructible. He feared the change

every time he faced danger, wondering if his latest trip in the TARDIS would be his undoing.

He'd fought the change off for a long time, remaining in his first... his *own*... body for far longer than he should have. He didn't trust regeneration. It was a fact of life, indeed, but not one that he had ever been able to come to terms with. So many people that he had known very well had reappeared to him as strangers, completely different in appearance and personality. They purported to be, in essence, the same, but somehow he could never accept them. So how could he accept the change in himself? Especially now, so far removed from his people and his home?

And so far from the TARDIS...

The Doctor's mind reeled with panic. He knew he was not in the TARDIS - nowhere near it, in fact. If he was not inside the Ship when the change took place, the damage to his mind and body could be devastating and permanent.

He commanded his mind to fight his body, urging it to release him from the semi-coma he had slipped into.

'Don't fight it, old chap, you'll only hurt yourself '

Another voice. But it was not from outside. It was clear and close. It was inside his own mind.

'Who are you?'

'I think a better question would be, "Who am I going to be?"' It was a man's voice, calm and cheerful. And familiar.

The Doctor struggled to steady his mind; the intrusion into his psyche unsettled him. 'I am not fond of riddles, sir, and I must ask that you state your intentions in plain language.' *Good grief, I'm talking to phantoms in my own mind. No, things are not going well, are they Doctor?*

'Oh I'm sure our friends out there will sort out the Cybermen,' the voice said. 'All we can do is sit tight and recover our strength. If we come out of this trance too quickly we may trigger the metamorphosis, and we really don't want that to happen in the middle of a South Pole Tracking Station, do we?'

'How do you know what's going to happen to me?' the Doctor asked angrily. 'I insist that you tell me who you are and how you have managed to invade my mind.'

The voice began to hum a tune. *Twinkle, twinkle little star...*

As if tumbling through a trap door, the Doctor's recent memory was abruptly released from the confines of his subconscious. Yes! The tracking station, Ben and Polly, General Cutler... those cybernetic creatures, like walking cadavers....

And just when he was about to solve everything, his body had given out.

'Yes, we have hung on to this persona a bit long, haven't we?' the voice said brightly. 'Look, it's nothing to be afraid of. You'll still be you, you'll just be me, too.'

'Now see here...' the Doctor stopped. For a moment there was silence in his mind. 'Yes, yes,' he said finally. 'I understand now.'

'That's right,' said the voice. 'You're talking to yourself.'

'I don't want it to happen,' said the Doctor. 'No, I won't go through with it.'

'You have no choice,' said the voice solemnly. 'Life... our life... depends on change and renewal. We can't hold it back any longer or we'll die outright. Let the butterfly emerge from its cocoon, so to speak.'

'You see, that isn't me at all.' grunted the Doctor. 'I would never indulge in such feeble metaphors...'

'Let go, Doctor,' whispered the voice.

The Doctor's mind was finally still. And he grieved for the loss of the only self he had ever known.

'Ben, we made it!' cried Polly. 'We've got a chance to live!'

'The Cybermen may, but you haven't,' said Cutler angrily. Nor does the Doctor. Wake him.'

Polly turned, in time to see the Doctor's eyes open. Slowly he sat up

and smiled. She smiled back, and as she did so she noticed something about his eyes. Something that hadn't been there before. A look of... peace?

'Don't worry,' whispered the Doctor. 'I'm here.'

An Inconsequential Death

DAVE STONE

He'd done it again! The infuriating old git had done it again. The young man followed the ... well, you'd have to call it the *trail* of clues leading from the chamber of alien biomedical bleep machines. First the lost fluids and effluvia from when the biomechanically-healed bodily processes were still halfway functioning, then by the shed skin and smell. Followed it through a tortuous maze of roundelated corridors that continually seemed to circumvent an actual destination. It was as if whoever - or whatever - had left the trail was operating on pure instinct, following some inner, distant call.

He found the old man, at last, in what might be described as a wardrobe in the same way that the Grand Canyon can be described as a hole in the ground. Racks of clothing - clothing and its attendant accessories and accoutrements of all kinds - appeared to Doppler to infinity and back in some dimensionally complex manner, like a couturier's warehouse crossed with a Klein bottle. The musty reek of a million kinds of ancient cloth degrading over time was all-but overpowering.

The old man sat slumped over before an assorted pile of items pulled haphazardly from the racks: a fedora hat, a garish patchwork overcoat, a rotting black frock-coat of some Edwardian design, a battered umbrella with a question-mark for a handle. The old man stirred at them, listlessly, with a liverspotted hand. He was bone-thin and desiccated, skin like a dry membrane of parchment covered with ulceration from where the biomedical units had so recently been plugged into him.

'So many...' he was muttering. 'So many ... things you do and then you *think* of them afterwards ... fighting the ... they had claws and guns for hands and they hated life ... a love of death that was a yearning and they hated...'

He became aware of the young man standing behind him and

lurched around. Something lucid and hard, and not at all friendly, switched on in his eyes as if a switch had been thrown.

'You,' the old man said, the all-but toothless mouth managing to inform the world with sharp and acid contempt. 'It's you is it? Again? Here again? How long have you been there *spying* on me?'

'Not long,' the young man said. 'I just didn't want you to hurt yourself.' He moved forward tentatively, offering his hand to help his elder up.

The old man flinched away from it. 'Back to the machines? They pump and pump again and I can feel them slickly *feeding* into me. Back to that living death?'

'You need them,' said the young man simply. 'You really do. Their regenerative processes are necessary if you're to -'

'Don't you talk to me about regeneration, you little pipsqueak!' The old man was almost screaming, 'I've regenerated more times than you've had hot ... meals that you eat hot. Why, I remember the time when I died and...'

His face went slack as what was left of his mind tried to recall a memory that simply wasn't there. Then he looked up at the young man with something that was nothing less than quiet pleading. 'Why can't you let me die? It'll all be better after I die. I'll be reborn. I'll be fresh and different and new...'

Despite himself, despite all the resolve he had built in himself, the young man found himself losing his temper. 'Because this is your *thirteenth life* you bloody old fool! When you die this time there'll be nothing better, or worse, or anything at all!'

The young man caught himself, swallowed his anger.

'Don't you remember?' His voice was as quiet as his elder's had become, with the same note of pleading though without the constant tone of senile whining. '*Please* try to remember. You dematerialised the TARDIS and then forgot how to operate the controls. I don't know how to make them work. You said that the only solution was to keep you alive in the hope that you'd come back to yourself for long enough to take us back into the world. Please remember that.'

The old man crumpled his face in thought. 'I seem... I seem to...'

Then his face cleared - not with the calm of remembering but with the blankness of one for whom almost every process has been lost. 'Where am I? Should I be here? I don't feel well...'

'You'll be all right,' the young man said, helping the old man, unprotesting, to his feet. 'There are things that can make you well.'

After the old man was settled again, amidst the nest of tubes and modules that bleeped and gurgled happily as though the act of feeding sustenance fed them, in some peculiar way, in turn, the young man walked the corridors lost in thought - or rather, lost in the processes of keeping thought at bay. He tried, if at all possible, not to think of the past years, to ignore the sheer and crushing weight of them.

When a trader sells a carpet in the bazaar, he tells you it's a magic carpet. All you need to make it fly is to not think of a blue camel. All carpets are magic if you know that and don't think of it.

It was not a question of a problem to be solved. It was a problem to be dealt with. The TARDIS was stuck in a metatemporal orbit around a secondary Vortex Core. There was no way to fling it from that orbit without destroying human life inside, and that was the end of it. Try to leave, try to leave now, and fragile human flesh would rupture, burst and spray off the bones.

The young man tried not to think of all those years in which he'd stayed young, while his younger companion had grown ever older - oscillating between stupor, lucidity and violent dementia in the extensive but ultimately self-enclosed and contained TARDIS interior. There were whole areas still in disarray, their contents flung about in mindless rage that at some point would have to be tidied up. It was hard not to remember that - even harder not to see it as an object lesson. The young man had in his time raged and flung his toys around in other, larger spaces, to much the same end effect.

It had almost been a relief, in the end, when the old man's swings in mood and sanity had settled into the basic dementia of senility. Lacking other stimuli, the old man had taken imprints from his surroundings, and now fully believed that he was the owner of them. He was - so he thought - a time-travelling alien whose superhuman recuperative powers would soon pull him from his present debilitation. He was not,

in actual fact, dying alone and elided from every single other specimen of his kind.

The young man tried not to disabuse him of this delusion. It seemed like the only thing to do.

Possibly, by this point, the kindest thing would be to simply fire up the Console Room again, set the controls and slingshot back into reality, or some reasonable approximation thereof. It would at least give the old man a quick, clean death... but when it came to the nub of it, here and now, when push came to the equivalent of shoving the off-switch on the life-support, the young man knew he couldn't bring himself to do it.

The old man was not, as yet, in sufficient pain, indignity or state of vegetation as to make the choice clear cut. And in such cases a Doctor can only do no harm, and wait for nature to take its course, as it must for us all. We walk through prisons of differing sizes and complexity, and delude ourselves that to drop and stop moving is to at the last find our way out.

The young man wandered, apparently at random, through corridors that turned in on themselves, waiting for them to lead him naturally to some actual destination, waiting for his old companion to finally die.

How The Mighty...

SHAUN LYON

"It's the end.. but the moment has been prepared for."
-- The Fourth Doctor, "Logopolis"

"I'm me. The Doctor. What I have been, someone might have imagined. What I will be, how can I tell?"
-- The Seventh Doctor, "Lungbarrow"

The azure twilight of an ancient star beat down as soft aurora on a non-descript, out-of-the-way outpost of civilization, illuminating the cracked pavement of a well-worn landing field. An old man with shiny black hair, clad in a pink jacket and wearing a light blue fedora on his head, looked up from his weatherbeaten console in the steel trappings of a broken-down toll plaza and gazed out across the field. Like so many that had come before him, his was the heavy heart of a tollman yet to take his most important toll.

On this day, which looked like any other, but most certainly wasn't, he knew his long wait was over.

The clock ticked away, counting the hours, the minutes, the seconds, until the time came. The silence of the landing field was suddenly broken with the soft wheeze of a dematerialization circuit, like so many the old tollman had heard in his days behind the console, but none so precise, so impossibly like the shapes and sound of his dreams. His quandary slowly began to coalesce on the asphalt across the darkened landing platform...

The blue box. He knew it only from his mind's eye, its corners and contours casting barely a shadow in the fading luminance above. The steely blue façade, the fine cut glass, the flickering light atop the box... He was suddenly surprised at how perceptive he had been. Every nuance, every facet of something he'd never seen was etched into his memory, and was now before him.

Just like he'd always known it would be.

The box stood silently, until the door opened and out stepped a little man. He was exactly like the tollman's dreams had foretold; brown coat, beige Panama hat, the paisley scarf around his neck. The man carried the black umbrella with the red question mark handle, and the aura of sophistication he had expected. The little visitor wandered up to the booth.

Silently, the toll man strode outside, onto the landing field. 'Hello,' said his lithe visitor with the umbrella, momentarily lifting his hat off his head, then replacing it just as quickly. 'I'm the Doctor. I'm here to pay my toll.'

The pink- and blue-decorated tollman smiled, and it was as if his grin brightened every corner of the toll plaza. 'How wonderful,' he said without a hint of sarcasm, brushing his lapel as he stood up. His shiny silver-pink costume winked in the soft light of the aging star above, but his hat nearly fell off his head. He caught it, always staying poised. 'I haven't had a toll customer in years! Nobody has, not since...' His voice trailed off.

'Terribly unfortunate,' said the Doctor. 'I remember.'

The toll man could see it on his face; even he knew the story of that tragedy, the death of his comrade, the dreaded Bannerman pirates... The toll taker laughed this time, a bawdy, harsh chuckle. 'That was Raazuul, the unlucky one. He'd have gotten himself lost in a one-room shack. Always complaining, always unhappy.' A pause. 'He spent most of his time here, in the toll station. The lines were short then, but not nearly as short as they are now.' He swept his arms around. 'Don't you see? Pick a toll lane, any lane. No waiting!'

'I can see that, Mister--'

'Fergus,' said the toll man.

'Delighted,' the Doctor answered, lifting his hat. 'Now, can we get on with it? I really must be going...'

'Patience, my friend. Let's take a moment to process your toll, hmmmmm?' Fergus paused as he moved slightly back toward the tollbooth.

This was his moment. His destiny.

Truth be told.

'Where are you headed? Ah, don't tell me,' he added quickly, 'let me guess.' Another pause. 'Skaro! Of course. To collect the remains of your arch-nemesis, pulverized by the Daleks.' He shook his head several times. 'It'll all end up in tragedy, I just know it.'

Fergus laughed again. The Doctor was becoming obviously annoyed with the constant chuckling, as he could see. 'But how did you--'

'You left Gallifrey,' Fergus interrupted, 'after a harrowing encounter with the remnants of your family at the notorious House of Lungbarrow. On behest of the planet's President--an old friend, if I recall. Then you abandoned your poor companion there to while away his time while you chase spectres across the Seven Galaxies.' He paused, chuckled slightly as if he were pleased with himself, then continued. 'And you then dawdled idly around the cosmos for some time thereafter. As *if* time was relative. Tsk, tsk, my friend.' He shook his head.

The Doctor stood motionless, taking in everything he'd heard. Confused, obviously, from the expression on his face.

Fergus was unphased. 'You need answers. Hmmph.' He dawdled idly for a moment. 'You see, my dear Doctor, we are the crux of the universe. The hub of civilized society, if you will--it is our business to know everything. I can see the passing thoughts on your face... you've come to the conclusion that I'm prescient, maybe. Or someone from your past. Someone who knew that you were coming here.' He swept his hands over the sullen complex. 'Indeed, I have awaited your arrival for many years. We don't get that many travellers around here anymore... the Navarinos have all gone home to brood, selling off their time technology to all and sundry; the once-mighty Zebulaks have regressed themselves into a new Stone Age.' A pause. 'Oh, even the Ogrons have learned the value of mass transit, my friend. No, Doctor, I haven't seen a traveller through the Toll Booth since... oh, I don't remember, that's how long it's been. How is Melanie?'

The last question almost knocked the Doctor out of his confusion. 'Who? Oh... Melanie, yes. Delightful, I'm sure,' he lied.

Fergus grinned, a toothy grin much like the Doctor's of a previous, brash incarnation. 'Ah, Doctor... the silver tongue that masks the truth.

I'm sure Mel will forgive you one of these days. After all, you *did* implant the suggestion into her mind that she should depart your company.' His voice suddenly became condescending. 'Such a terrible thing to do to a young woman, sending her off with that terrible space pilot -- oh, what was his name--'

'Glitz,' responded the Doctor. 'And if you must know, I did it for her best interests.'

'Best interests,' Fergus replied matter-of-factly. 'You never wanted her around in the first place. That's why you kept avoiding her, in your last incarnation, hoping to alter causality after that travesty of a trial aboard the Time Lord Council ship. You figured, if you never met, you could change your future, and avoid the fate of becoming the Valeyard that you so terribly dread.'

The Doctor knocked the floor with the tip of his umbrella. The resulting click echoed loudly across the paved field of the toll station, against the stark grey walls opposite the booth. 'You're a very nosy toll keeper, Mister Fergus. Tell me, do you pry into everyone's life, or just mine?'

'You couldn't avoid your fate, Doctor,' Fergus continued, ignoring the Doctor's words. 'So Mel came to you, almost as if it were an afterthought, after you'd spent so much time trying to avoid her. But you couldn't, could you? After your battle with the Usurians, you couldn't help but run into her.'

'But--'

'And then,' Fergus interrupted, 'you couldn't get rid of her. So she stayed, through Broga Seven, the Flaming Spires of Ethos...' He continued like he enjoyed listening to his own memory for proper names. '...the Millennium Codex, the Vervoids... Maradnias... that dreadful affair at Caliban that got so messy for you... And even after you regenerated, she stuck by your side, didn't she? Against the Rani, and the Chimerons, and when you nearly gave up in Pompeii. And then you abandoned her at Iceworld, you silly man. Rather, she thought she was leaving you. That was your doing, wasn't it?' He could see the Doctor's impatience. 'Continuity! Self-referential recursion. Your own personal canon, if you will. We rail against it, but truth be told,

everything in our lives affects everything else.'

The Doctor ignored his protests. 'This really is none of your business, mind you, but Mel would have been hurt by remaining with me. I knew what I had to do, where I had to go...'

'Yes, yes,' said Fergus. 'Time's Champion. You've said that to so many, but do they truly understand what it means? Time herself, an Eternal, a goddess of your precious Gallifrey, and you, her Champion, her guardian of spurious morality. So the end justifies the means, then. Tell me, Doctor, how do you justify what happened to Ace?'

'Ace is fine.' The Doctor rested his hands on the railing outside the booth. 'You tell *me*, Fergus, just how do you know so much about me?'

Fergus shook his head. 'Not that easy, Doctor. Ace grew to hate you before she forgave you. Or have you forgotten Heaven? When you callously let a man die. The man Ace came to love.'

'*In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun...*' quoted the Doctor.

'Now you're being flippant.'

The Doctor sneered slightly. 'I thought you tolltakers were supposed to be a jolly sort. You were positively glowing when I landed here.'

'Ace trusted you,' Fergus said, ignoring the Doctor's protests.

'Ace is a grown woman. Who was it who said that a man, or in this case a woman, is more than the sum of her past?'

'Mixed metaphors, my dear Doctor,' Fergus responded in kind. 'Then there's Bernice--'

The Doctor slammed the umbrella down on the railing. 'There. That's where you fail, Mister Fergus. Bernice is quite happy now, an explorer, a *bon vivant*... she holds me in nothing but the highest affection.'

'But poor Bernice has had to face her own challenges, now, hasn't she? Almost dying at the hands of the Master, for example, or in the company of that... that... pusillanimous vagabond she once called a husband. And we won't even discuss the Gods of Dellah now, or that duplicitous associate of yours, the Braxiatel fellow. When are you going to face reality, Doctor, the reality that you put your companions in danger every step of the way?'

'Am I on trial again?' asked the Doctor. 'Because if you are the

Valeyard, you're a very poor imitation.' He looked at Fergus' face. 'Not a terribly good job with my nose, actually.'

'If s my own nose,' said Fergus. He wiggled his nose. 'Do you see? Mine and only mine. Let's get back to facts, shall we?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I don't see the point. I realize now that it was a mistake to come here. Symbolic, really, because I travel in time and space. Tolls don't apply to me.' He turned, ready to walk back to the TARDIS.

'Ah, but Doctor,' reminded Fergus, 'don't you want to know how I know so much about you? Aren't you the least bit curious, I mean?'

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. He turned around.

'Curiosity killed the cat, or in this case, ensnared the Time Lord.' Fergus smiled. 'What do I mean, 'in this case'? You've let your nose for trouble lead you astray throughout your life. Daleks, Sontarans, Cybermen... they're still in the nursery compared to you.'

'*Ten thousand years of absolute power*... that's what I believe I said, in the courtroom. So you *were* there, on the Council ship. Valeyard? Inquisitor? Or one of the Time Lords I exposed for corruption, perhaps?' The Doctor shook his head. 'Revealed by your own twist of tongue, Mister Fergus. It seems that time and tide does *indeed* melt the snowman...'

Fergus only shrugged his shoulders, remaining wistful. 'Let's talk about you, shall we?' said the Doctor. 'How long have you been here?'

'Oh... far too long. I've waited nearly a century for you to arrive. I didn't think it would take that long. You see, mine was but a simple task to fulfil.'

'A task?'

Fergus coughed. 'We all have our great tasks to perform. Our own personal demons to... excommunicate.'

The Doctor set his umbrella down next to him, and took a seat on a small concrete outcropping next to the tollbooth. Fergus remained in his toll cache, his position flexible enough to enjoy the Doctor's conversation from any angle. 'So you expected me, then. How exactly?'

'That would be telling...'

'How?' asked the Doctor again. He didn't raise his voice; it was one

of those questions that one knew had to be answered, if only to set the equilibrium of the universe back onto its proper charge.

'I had a dream one night,' said Fergus. 'In that dream, the universe unfolded for me and showed me its dirty little secrets. And in that moment of clarity, surprise be to the Maker if you weren't in it! All of you, but mostly you, now... By the way, you changed the colour of your jacket. I liked the lighter one better. Certainly more than the one you wore during your last incarnation...'

'Stick to your story, please,' said the Doctor.

Fergus didn't miss a beat. 'And I saw, in my dream, the faces of your friends, and those of your enemies. A voice came to me, and whispered in my ear. It was... hypnotic. And it told me about you, about all the secrets you never wanted revealed. The secrets about your family and their eternal entombment, which Lady Peinforte nearly exposed.' That was enough to surprise the Doctor, whose face lit up. 'It told me about your guilt,' Fergus continued, 'your regrets, and all that pent up anger you keep bottled inside of you.'

'Anger? I have no anger.'

'Ah, but you do, Doctor, or else the Valeyard wouldn't exist, even as a possibility, now, would he? An amalgamation of the darker side of your nature, I believe is what they called it. And no, Doctor, before you start down that road again, I am not the Valeyard, nor indeed was I ever at your trial. You and I, good sir, have never met before.'

'And I'm supposed to believe you?' the Doctor replied. 'That in a dream, someone came to you and spilled all my secrets, including my familial mishmash and my visit to Skaro...' The Doctor momentarily checked his pocket watch. '...that I am now very, very late for.'

'Time is indeed relative, Doctor, or have you forgotten that? If you're late, you could always leave... but you won't, will you? Because you're somehow compelled by your own curiosity to stay and hear me out, despite being quite unprepared for what you'll hear.'

'So tell me, then. Enlighten me.'

Fergus paused briefly. 'Roz.'

'What about her?'

'Roslyn Forrester wasn't the first companion to die on you. Sara

Kingdom was an accident, of course, as was Katarina. And Adric chose his own destiny; you were just along for the ride. But Roz was most special to you, though, wasn't she? An equal. Not a student. Not your subordinate. She never faltered in your presence, never let you have the upper hand.'

JEREMY BEMENT

'She made her own decisions,' the Doctor said simply.

'That's what you like to think, don't you? Truth be told, my good Doctor, she idolized you. Oh, not at first, no. But in time, she grew to like you, then appreciate you, and finally trust you. Because to Roz, it was never a study in greys. The universe was black or white to her, good or evil, something to be reckoned with and aided or something to be wiped out for the sake of mankind. She was a soldier, and she paid the price.'

'Her price, if you could call it that, was her destiny.'

Fergus laughed. This time, he was serious. 'Doctor, you amaze me! How quickly you forget your motivations, the reasons why you take companions into your TARDIS. You are a loner by nature, but you *despise* being alone. You are not a catalyst for destiny; you are a *shaper of* that destiny. Roz came to you not out of chance; she was a part of your fate.'

'You say that so callously!' the Doctor responded. 'Roz was my friend, as were Sara and Adric and Liz and Katarina -- and everyone else whose paths I've crossed. Everyone dies in the grand scheme of the universe. I've faced the deaths of many of my friends, through fate or illness or the passage of time.' He looked at his pocket watch again. 'It's late, relatively speaking, and the universe is getting restless. My companions are dead, aren't they? Dead thousands, sometimes millions of years in the past. Intellectually, I know that. But here--' he pointed to his hearts, '---here is where they live on.'

'Christopher,' Fergus said. 'Chris Cwej is an idealist. You, at an early

age, you might say. The last of your companions in your seventh incarnation. You left him on Gallifrey, to an uncertain future. Why?'

'Why?' the Doctor replied, incredulously. 'Chris doesn't need my guidance anymore. He needs to live his own life, shape his own destiny.'

'Like Melanie.'

'That's not fair.'

'Why not, Doctor? You didn't give her the choice, did you? Did you go back for Peri when your trial was over, and you found out she'd lived? Or dear Victoria, left in the company of strangers she barely knew. And I ask you... any regrets, Doctor? You gave Tegan the scare of her life, surrounded by dead bodies, murdered at the hands of the Daleks. Left Nyssa in the company of the dying.' He was on a roll now. 'Steven, in the company of the savages of an unnamed planet. Dear Susan, abandoned to an uncertain fate on a ravaged Earth. Your precious Time Lords took away the memories of Jamie and Zoe, only to return Jamie's mind when they pulled you out of time to do their dirty work. But did they stop there? No, because poor Jamie became only one more pawn in the games of other people.' All traces of the earthy smile had left Fergus' face, and only the cold of harsh truth remained.

The Doctor bolted upright, grabbing his umbrella.

'You let Liz Shaw die horribly. And do you even know what happened to Dodo?'

A sour look from the Doctor hit the tollman squarely in the chest.

Memories in the Doctor's life came back to him in the blink of an eye, a tide of thoughts and feelings passing over him like waves upon the sand...

Fade in.
The Doctor stands at attention, on the multicolored plain of his memory.
His friends are here. Mel. Ace. Benny. Roz. Chris.

'And to think that Time herself called you her Champion! You who consort with Fenric, who dares believe himself a player against the Gods of Ragnarok.'

The Doctor turned to leave the tollbooth.

I found my destiny through you, Doctor, says Roz.

'Taking time out of your busy schedule battling the evils of the universe to set up shop in a Chicago speakeasy.'

Without a word, he stepped into the plaza.

You are kindness, compassion, the cream in my coffee,
says Mel.

'Chasing legends of the Ice Warriors across the plains of Mars while Earth suffers the wrath of the Dalek armada.'

One step first, then another...

I've always believed in you, Professor, says Ace.

'Matching wits with Sherlock Holmes, while your companions suffer from your bad temper and their unwitting status as pawns in a thousand year game!'

The Doctor began to run...

I'm hungry. Is there anything to eat? asks Chris.

'Adric is dead, Doctor. Katarina is dead. Roz is dead because she had the audacity to believe in you!'

The Doctor ran.

You are the light and the world, Doctor, says Bernice.

'Do you hear me, Doctor?' Fergus screamed. '*You failed to make a difference*...!'

And the Doctor stopped.

Bernice, Chris, Roz and Melanie gasp.
Ace winks at the Doctor and smiles.
Crescendo.

He paused, without moving an inch, time to catch a single breath.

Then, he turned. One step, then another, back across the plaza, toward the tollbooth. Fergus was smiling again, knowing he'd made his point, but unaware of the box he'd opened.

'I don't believe in *you*, Mr. Fergus,' said the Doctor. 'I know what I've done. I've made decisions in my life, some of which I am not particularly proud of. But I have never once questioned the role that the Universe wished me to play.'

'And what role would that be, Doctor?' asked Fergus.

The Time Lord raised his head. His was no longer the face of a man chastened for past mistakes; he was strength, clear perception, control, a wisdom of the ages. 'The young child has fallen; her mother is gone, her father cannot hear her. She cries in the darkness, wishing the hurt to go away. *Someone* must be there to pick her up off the ground, to protect her from the monsters that lurk beneath the bed.' He took a breath. 'I alone do not hold the key to saving the universe from itself. But if a man has the power to make that difference, to pick that child up off the ground, shake the dust from her trousers and offer the comfort of his shoulder, then he must answer that call, or else he has learned nothing.'

'But--'

'I am the Doctor,' he continued. 'I wander in time and space, challenging evil, undoing wrongs, fighting the good fight. Worlds have been saved; armadas silenced; teatimes met with valour.' He managed the hint of a smile, but it soon faded. 'From the dawn of time to the end of everything, I have been there. My methods may be blurred, my reasons misunderstood, but my hearts have always been in the right place.'

Fergus stepped out of the booth.

'Time,' he said, 'would tend to agree with you.'

The Doctor stayed motionless, even after Fergus the toll collector came and put his hand on the Doctor's shoulder. The toll man's tone of voice had suddenly changed, grown soft.

'If not you,' he continued, 'then who? Who to stand in the way of darkness, who to fight the good fight?'

'I thought you--' the Doctor began.

'You take many companions along with you. Doctor.' Fergus said. 'Not the least of which is your guilt. Anger, frustration, anxiety, they all walk with you. Your path has taken you to countless worlds where your mark has been left... why can you not see the good you have done?' He could see the Doctor's confusion. 'You forget, Doctor. No, you *let* your memory fail you. For all you take with you, you leave the positive behind. The people you have known, all of them... they have forgiven you. Why can't you forgive yourself?'

'Who are *you* to give *me* solace?'

'A friend,' Fergus said. 'I know your thoughts. I've seen your history. Ace has gone on to cherish the time she spent with you. Chris has a promising future ahead of him, filled with all sorts of danger and adventure... right up his alley, I guess you could say. And Melanie... well, she will come to understand her life in time. It will take a while, but you know what they say, what goes around...'

The Doctor was dumbstruck. 'You mean to tell me that all of this was aimed solely at alleviating my guilt?'

Fergus nodded. 'The universe is a dangerous place, Doctor. You have brought hope to where there was never hope before. The dark times you spent with your travelling companions, those times are now but a memory. Take solace only in that, if you take nothing else away from this toll plaza at the edge of the cosmos.'

The Time Lord shook his head. 'How the mighty have fallen,' he said. He motioned to his surroundings: the decaying toll booth, the stark pavement of the plaza, the grey and distrusting walls that enclosed it, the dying star whose light could barely illuminate his walk. 'You, who stand in the way, taking your toll on travellers you haven't right to stop, preying not only on their wallets, but on their suffering and regret. From an empire of busybodies and sycophants, ready and willing to pass judgment, where it is not yours to pass. Here, on a world so unimportant it doesn't even have a name... here, you sit, your once proud empire collapsed in ruins, the paint falling from your precious toll booth, and for what? So you can wait for that troubling moment to strike at the guilt of someone you don't even know, a

moment of nothing but sarcastic bravado and notions of pity. Empty words at the loneliest hour.' He paused. 'How tragic.'

'I forgive you, Doctor,' said Fergus.

The Doctor stopped again. 'What?'

'I forgive you. Everyone needs someone to forgive them, don't they? *The end justifies the means...* well, here you sit, at the end; your seventh incarnation enters its twilight, and you find yourself looking for something to unlock your anguish. You have been Time's Champion, but now, those tasks are done -- all but one, the one your people have given to you.' He paused briefly, almost for dramatic effect, and then continued. 'Go, Doctor. Go to Skaro. Bring the Master back to them, if it will do any good. Meanwhile, remember your old friend Fergus here, the one who waited for you here, in the backwaters of the universe, to share with you this moment of truth.' Fergus paused once again, and then swept his arm back toward the booth, in a gesture that wasn't lost upon the Doctor. 'For one final time, the toll booth has served its purpose. Your toll has been taken, Doctor, and you have earned your passage. Time forgives you.'

The Doctor turned to leave.

'I forgive you,' Fergus said. 'They forgive you.' He started yelling now, as the Doctor approached his TARDIS. 'They believed in you, Doctor! Never forget that!'

The Doctor only shook his head as he unlocked the door and entered.

I forgive you, Professor, says Ace.

So do I, Doc, says Mel.

Bernice smiles, and winks at him.

Chris munches on something unseen, but he smiles with the innocence of youth.

Roz approaches the Doctor.

I have nothing to forgive, she says, touching his face with a gentle brush. I believe in you. I always will.

The Doctor moves away, off the stage of his memories. He is content, transformed.

The muse goes silent.

Fade to black.

With a wheeze and a whir, the TARDIS slowly faded from sight. Once again, on the battered, ancient surface of the the toll planet, Fergus was alone.

He smiled to himself and sighed, as he returned to the tollbooth. For several minutes, he simply sat there, unmoving. Then he looked into the distance, toward no one in particular, and spoke to the shadows. 'I did what you asked,' he said. 'Everyone needs someone to forgive them, don't they?'

Yes, came the reply from the shadows, from the tollbooth, from his thoughts... the soft, mellifluous, undoubtedly female voice he remembered from his dreams. ***The Doctor has been liberated. In time, he will shed the guilt of the actions of this incarnation. Perhaps he will walk a new path in his next one. Time is fleeting.***

'What about me?' Fergus said.

Time forgives you, she said.

And with a flash of insight, Fergus remembered. The darkest, hauntingly tragic parts of his life--the moments he'd locked within himself like a box without a key--came washing over him like a wave of water; his youth, the hate, the fear, the suffering, when he did what he did believing the end justified the means. All the people that he had hurt, the pain he'd caused, the horrible vengeance he had exacted. A hundred bloody images of a thousand terrible deeds flashed before him, and he was chastened, a penance exacted in the silence of his own thoughts. Now he saw the darkness, and was reborn outside of it... hopes, dreams, harmony; all walked with him, carried him forward,

forgave him, as Time did. It was all very clear to him now. Time had come to him in his dreams, telling him stories, whispering her secrets, crying for his soul… and asked for only one thing in return. And so he had done as she'd asked, sitting quietly at a toll plaza all these years, waiting for the one moment he could pay his own toll, and pass through the proverbial gates of his own guilt.

Fergus smiled to himself, at last in peace. With the soft caress of the ancient wind, and the heavy heart of a man forgiven, he faded away--once again returning the toll plaza to its isolated, forgotten ghosts and former glories, the incandescent azure light doomed to fall upon silence for all eternity.

And Time herself was content.

Time needs a new Champion, she said to no one but the winds of eternity. ***The Doctor has earned his peace***.

Fiction Paradox

DAMON CAVALCHINI

A maybe man, one of the diplomats of potentiality, looked out and saw the collapsing dominoes of his past, present and future. If he thought about it, he could envision every decision, every flap of a butterfly's wings, diminishing his chance to be real. He could sense every thought condemning his life to a mere movie reel of possibility.

Briefly he considered the nature of his visitor while he stared at the stars. There was something wrong about him. If the maybe man thought about it he could see the uneasy union of potential and reality, a unique duality of what-is and what-might-be, fighting for possession of the alien.

Turning to his guest the maybe man spoke, quietly but with a sub-vocal hint of immense age.

'Well, Doctor, have you made your choice?'

The Doctor let his eyes roam around the world absorbing the sights, seeing the chances he had missed, the paths he had failed to walk. His life, his very presence in the space-time continuum was a risk. Not for the first time the Doctor felt the dangers of oracular prescience. To know the future was to risk changing it, to chance unravelling the complex web of causality. Some races, some truly gifted people, like the maybe man lived, interpreted and, it was whispered in the dark corners of Gallifreyan society, even breathed this complex mix of potentiality. Remembering his situation the Doctor focussed his attention on the maybe man as he considered his answer.

'Oh, really, this one won't do at all,' he said, dismissing a sudden wave of apprehension. Yet again he felt a nagging sense of doubt about drifting through his future in search of a defence. He was on trial for his life and the example he chose must be sublime. 'Show me something different.'

'I beg your pardon?'

The Doctor gestured to the wilderness surrounding them. 'This is all

supposed to represent the undetermined nature of the existence and the like, so why not show me something more...' he paused, searching for the word, ...palatable?'

The maybe man blinked. Around them life flickered on and off in a contradictory state of permanent flux.

'I'm the most solid thing here,' muttered the Doctor. 'You do realise that this is all just quasi-scientific flim-flam? I mean, you can't have a world where history changes constantly. You'd be living in the forever now. Think about it. We couldn't be standing here talking as we would each forget whatever word, possibly even whatever sound, preceded the one we were, are, currently saying. It would be impossible for anyone to understand what was going on. Even a genius like myself would find the lack of a clear, linear narrative difficult to comprehend.'

He turned and whispered conspiratorially, 'That's why I gave up on the books, you know.'

Feeling a wave of unfamiliar confusion replace the comfortable uncertainty of his life, the maybe man gazed out at infinity.

'More palatable?'

On another planet in yet another time a sun's warm fingers reached over the horizon and caressed the Doctor's face. A flush of heat filled his cheeks. For a brief second, he considered removing his garish, multi-coloured coat but he quickly reconsidered as he remembered what was about to come. Wind tousled his blond, curly hair and he tasted the sharp tang of anticipation as he drew a long, deep breath, drinking in the thick atmosphere.

'Invigorating,' he said as he slowly exhaled. 'Sometimes I think I could stand here and watch this particular sunrise every day of my life.'

In fact he already had seen it all before. Somewhere else on the mountain at least two other Doctors were watching the dawning spectacle aware of, but deliberately ignoring, the others' presence.

'So, let's video it and move on.'

Normally Melanie Bush loved the sunrise, the feeling of a new day dawning but, for some reason, she was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain her enthusiasm. For the last two hours she and the Doctor had stood at the base of the mountain waiting for this extra special

dawn. Well, OK, she admitted to herself, she had sat down on the rock for a bit but the broken lumps of stone were in all the wrong places for human comfort. Despite having travelled with the renegade Time Lord for more than a year now, Mel was still constantly amazed how he could move from bursts of frenzied activity to reflective meandering in the blink of an eye.

After rummaging through a canvas knapsack the Doctor had thoughtfully brought with them, she pulled out a soggy muesli bar and sat down on the dew-covered ground to chew. She had seen sunrises before, and attractive as it was, she couldn't understand the Doctor's fascination with this particular one. The Grand Canyon. The ancient ruins in Greece. The first hints of the sun rising over the Great Pyramid. Even the simple sight of the early rays over the hedge back at Pease Pottage had provided equally entertaining displays of morning's birth. There weren't even two or more suns to make things look much different from back home. Just another plain old, boring, yellow circle in the sky.

Then the heavens exploded.

Rain fell from a sky that had been clear blue only moments before. Lightning leapt across the now blackened sky, dancing from cloud to cloud as though drawn by an artist with a shaky hand. Thunder crashed above them, waves of sound pulsed through her body, reverberating through her chest, her heart, her lungs. A hundred smells assaulted her nose as dust, leaves, and water mixed to create a unique and overpowering aroma. The wind, which moments ago had been gently playing with the Doctor's hair, threatened to pick her up and pummel her against the side of the mountain.

And, throughout it all, the Doctor just stood there admiring the dark horizon.

'Absolutely exhilarating,' he exclaimed. 'And you wanted to record this! How can you record the wonders of such a moment? What would you do? Add a soundtrack of staccato rhythms breaking each one just before they reach a conclusion? This is life, Mel. This is being alive. You cannot record this. You have to experience it. Feel it. Sense it. Taste it. There will never be another moment like this again. Ever.'

A huge boyish grin lit up his face and he was practically shouting to

be heard over the cacophony of nature's wild party 'Mel, if I never see another a sunrise again, then at least I have Gran'dezza.'

The Doctor turned to look at his companion and his infectious enthusiasm evaporated immediately.

'Great,' she muttered to herself. 'I'm glad someone's happy.

'What was that?'

'I said this is just great, Doctor. I'm sorry but I just can't be enthused about getting soaked while having the life scared at d me.'

'Oh, do buck up, Melanie. I agree there is a degree of physical discomfort attached to the experience but can you not feel the electricity running through your bones? Electrons jumping from molecule to molecule, passing through your skin, recharging the batteries of your soul?' The Doctor half pirouetted, his arms making a wide, sweeping gesture indicating everything around them. 'Can't you appreciate the greatest fireworks display you are ever likely to see? Besides-' he added maliciously, '-you get excited about everything. Even carrot juice.'

But Mel just shivered. Her batteries had already been charged to overflowing. A pair of mud-splattered white jeans stuck to her legs like adhesive bandages while her pink jacket flapped uselessly as the winds continued to buffet her. As for her hair...

'You're a Time Lord. You could see this moment over and over again if you wanted. I mean, didn't you tell me that the guy we passed earlier, the one with the scarf and the savage, was another one of you?'

'Well-' the Doctor began with the condescendingly superior tone he adopted whenever he thought she had said something stupid. Something human, as he called it.

'No, Doctor, I am not well. You knew what was going to happen and you didn't tell me.' She sighed. 'I guess I'm just tired of bouncing around the wonders of the Universe searching for gimble fish-'

'Gumblejacks,' the Doctor muttered to himself.

'Sorry.' She placed a hand on the Doctor's shoulder and said sympathetically. 'I used to like all the travelling, all the new experiences. But something's different. I'm wet, cold and tired. And all I want to do is go home.'

Seeing her distress, the Doctor instantly became conciliatory. Perhaps he had been thinking of himself. But he only wanted to share this moment, to translate a little of the excitement, with his companion. Nonetheless, humans were a notoriously weak species. Maybe the thrill of a Gran'dezza sunrise was too much for her.

'You know what you need,' he said contritely.

A week in the Bahamas? A deep body massage in front of an open fireplace in a secluded ski resort? A Yorkie bar? Whatever she needed right now Mel doubted it would be what the Doctor had in mind.

'A nice home cooked dinner. Roast potatoes, chicken, and gravy. Even some vegetables if you insist. We'll follow it up with a glass or two of a delightful red and add a dash of charming company. What do you think of that?'

Visions of Swedish masseurs faded to be replaced another, almost as tempting, dream. 'And you can arrange all that?'

The Doctor pulled a faded piece of paper from one of his pockets. 'I've been keeping this until such a point as it might be useful.'

The force of the winds faded as the sun tightened its grip on the Gran'dezza sky.

'So-' she wondered as she scanned the regal looking invitation, '-how well do you know this Marcus Stevenson?'

'I haven't seen him for a couple of bodies or so but I'm sure he'll be happy to see us. Marcus' dinner parties are the talk of London and my presence at one will be the icing on the metaphorical cake. Besides, his chef rivals the great Anatole for creations of culinary perfection.'

'Hi there, lovers, and welcome to this Saturday afternoon soiree at the Love Shack. For the next two hours we're going to get down and dirty with a huge line-up of stars and guests. Everyone's favourite Love Doctor, psychologist Peter Marshall, joins us to chat about obsession and fantasy and the difference between the two. And, then there's Lover's Lane, the world's most popular talk back session where you tell us what you want -- in, out and on the bed of life. But first here 's a classic track from fading French songstress, Celine Dion. I don't know about her heart but this track goes on, and on, and on... '

The radio faded into silence as David Holmes hit the off button with his left elbow. Sticking a hand tentatively under the stream of steaming water, he decided the shower was just about hot enough to take the chill out of his bones. He'd have to be quick. The other guests had recently arrived and his pleasant hot rinse threatened to become a cold shower if he didn't hurry up.

A thick mist of steam filled the room as David reached for the shampoo and started to lather his hair. Despite its age, Marcus Stevenson's country house was a marvel. All in all, David decided, this was going to be a great evening. Good company, delicious food, and not a single care in the world.

Sticking his head under the torrents of water, David winced as the bathroom was filled with a cacophony of noise.

'Damn pipes,' he thought to himself as he reached out and adjusted the hot water tap. After some careful fiddling the noise faded away and David resumed applying lathers of soap.

Which meant Mel's scream as she emerged from the TARDIS caught him completely by surprise.

'Don't be silly Mel. I told you the scanner showed it was a bit foggy out there. David,' exclaimed the Doctor, as he followed her out. 'What an interesting surprise to see you here. You just up for the weekend?'

'Hello, Doctor,' David replied, mourning his relaxing weekend and his modesty. 'Would you mind passing me a towel?'

Marcus Stevenson stared at the fragile leaves dancing in the wind. Soon, the rest of his guests would arrive and then the fireworks would begin. Tonight, he had decided, was the night to bury the squabbles of the last few years and surrender his battles to a new, younger solider. His eyes had finally been opened to the deals and compromises that now weighed heavily on his soul.

Shadows played fleetingly across his face. Tonight was Marcus Stevenson's last chance for redemption. Pulling a plastic container from his jacket pocket, he removed a small white pill and quickly swallowed. Marcus was dying and, like many dying men, he wanted to leave the world with a clearer conscience than he enjoyed while living in it.

Sighing to himself, Marcus Stevenson admitted he did not like

confrontation. He did not like to be obvious, preferring a subtle approach which sometimes even disguised his efforts. But there were secrets that had to be exposed and, with the security of imminent death, he now felt ready to take up the crusade to reveal them.

'If you speak, you will die.'

Marcus admitted the threats had silenced him for a time. Instead he had chosen to speak in a way that few could hear. That was why he had invited David and his friend Judy. The young man was one of the few people with the ability to understand the meaning of the deception. All the plans and schemes of the last twenty years lay exposed in the subtlety of meaning.

And, on the hidden directory on his laptop's hard drive. There was only so much he chose to leave to chance.

Besides, he reasoned to himself, even if David failed to put the information together, there was always the Doctor to rely on. Provided he decided to attend.

Unfortunately, Marcus reflected sadly as a lump of metal smashed into his skull, he had slightly less time to live than he had realised.

'Oh well,' he thought to himself. 'At least the moment had been prepared for.'

'Mel. something is terribly wrong,' the Doctor whispered. He had dragged Mel back into the console room while an embarrassed David got dressed. 'You see, the last time I saw David he was, well, dead.'

'Dead?'

The Doctor began to pace madly around the console as if looking for a sign from one of the instruments to explain what was happening.

'Deceased, departed, lifeless. In short, not alive.'

'Are you sure,' Mel asked.

Coming to a sudden stop, the Doctor appeared about to explode when he abruptly calmed down.

'Yes,' he said quietly. 'I've seen enough dead bodies, in fact I've seen far too many dead bodies, during my various lives to be sure. No one who has truly experienced the horror of expiration can ever be confused by it again. David was dead.'

Blithely he began flicking switches on the hexagonal console in front

of him. Every so often he leaned closer, as if studying something.

'The problem is I cannot tell if we've materialised before my previous encounter with him or not. The TARDIS sensors are presenting some anomalous readings.'

'Anomalous as in they do not make sense? Or anomalous as in the sensors don't work.'

The Doctor scowled. 'This is no laughing matter, Mel. Suppose I say something that impacts on David's life and he doesn't die when and where he should? What if, somehow, I change the course of history? The implications are terrifying. Oh, I realise you, with your limited human understanding of time, may not comprehend the disaster that could befall us. But I am a Time Lord. I have a higher responsibility as a custodian of the intricate pattern of cause and effect. Until I can determine at what point in David's life we have arrived, we will have to be very careful and guard our every word.'

'I'm sure we must have arrived prior to his death,' Mel insisted desperately. 'This is a holiday, remember.'

She adjusted the strap on the dress she had decided to wear for dinner. A clingy, formal number, the dress was perfect for wowing company but was highly impractical for chasing monsters or fleeing for her life.

'Doctor, how does David die,' she asked nervously. If she was going avoid saying anything inappropriate she might as well know. Otherwise the Doctor would no doubt seize on some innocent comment and correct her.

'He was hit by a car.'

For a second Mel felt a surge of relief. She had been imaging rampaging aliens or insane would-be dictators causing the young man's death. That is how most of the people tended to die around the Doctor.

'He went to cross the road, the driver wasn't looking and bam. Just like thousands of people everyday.'

Or, the Doctor added silently to himself, what if the man out there is a walking corpse? Secretly the Doctor hoped that, somehow, his friend had survived the accident even though it meant the earth's timeline had suffered a massive fracture. Time might be flexible but even she had her breaking point.

A banging noise on the TARDIS door interrupted his reverie.

'So, what brings you here, Doctor,' David asked as the two time travellers joined him in his guest room. Water from his still wet hair dripped onto the collar of his shirt and a faint aroma of soap drifted off his skin. 'I must warn you that I came here for a rest and a good meal. No monsters, no madmen. If the world is in imminent danger of destruction it will have to wait until desert.'

'I agree,' Mel added, offering her hand for David to shake. 'Melanie Bush, by the way.'

'David Holmes.'

The two of them smiled at each, leaving the Doctor with a perplexed look on his face.

'You do know that every time he arrives things have a habit of going belly-up,' David asked Mel.

Before the Doctor could protest his innocence, Mel said, 'Not every time. It just seems that way to most people. Sometimes he will fmd the most unassuming place and sit there, studying the movement of the clouds. Or that time we went to the library planet of Neofitou. Or that conference dealing with the biological imperatives of the dust mite. No, believe it or not, he can actually be quite boring when he wishes.'

'Boring? Boring?' The Doctor's voice began its familiar crescendo of injured pride. 'I am a Time Lord, my dear Mel. I may be reserved, contemplative or even philosophical at times but I am never, ever, boring. If you are unable to take an adequate interest in expanding your limited education or to sample the new experiences I provide for you then I cannot be held responsible for your failings.'

He would have continued except that Mel began to giggle.

Dropping his voice to a normal level he abruptly wondered sulkily what time dinner was served. As if in answer to his question, Danvers Carew knocked on the door. A mature gentleman, Carew was approaching retirement and the prospect of a special mention in the forthcoming New Year's Honours list was all that kept him going into the office in the morning.

At David's shouted invitation he entered the room.

'Judy says dinner will be served in about half an hour,' he began before noticing David's guests. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realise anyone

else had arrived.'

Mel quickly introduced herself and the Doctor, causing Carew to frown in confusion.

'Are you sure? I remember you as a slightly older gentleman.'

The Doctor coughed. 'I've had a couple of facelifts since then.'

Carew stared thoughtfully at him for a moment then seemed to disregard the matter.

'Well, I don't suppose there could be two people with the same atrocious dress sense. Mind you I preferred the Edwardian look, myself. This new fashion style is just ridiculous.'

Ignoring the look of apoplexy on the Doctor's face, he continued blithely. 'French I suppose. Never did like this newfangled statement dressing. Anyway you must give me the name of your surgeon,' he added, running a hand through his own greying hair. 'I like the nose, by the way. Very nice job. Very professional'.

A terrified scream interrupted his rambling.

Mel and David turned and glared at the Doctor.

'What are you looking at me for,' he protested. 'I haven't done anything.'

Professor Adrian Parkinson watched the strange creature with professional detachment. Trapped behind solid Perspex walls the alien paced the small room with obvious anxiety. Or at least that's what he thought it would look like if you could attribute human emotions to something that looked like a giant squid on legs. In the three weeks since it had been captured the alien had tried to escape on many occasions. But the walls refused to crumble before its trumpet call.

Catching a glimpse of his reflected image in the Perspex, Parkinson smiled sadly to himself. A career scientist in his late forties his only chance of securing a profitable retirement for himself lay in deciphering the secrets held by the creature in the cage. Where did it come from? How did it get here? What is it? Despite working twenty hours a day since he was first brought into the Project, Parkinson was no closer to answering any of these questions.

'Grenfell's got the latest genetic data he wanted.'

Parkinson didn't need to look around to see who spoke. Isobel Guerre had a habit of suddenly appearing from out of nowhere.

'Good. '

Isobel smiled at the disdain in Parkinson's voice. Jealous of Grenfell's youth, and his already blossoming reputation as THE geneticist of the century, Parkinson couldn't hide his dislike of the young scientist. Which suited Isobel perfectly.

She slid a pale hand through her long, blonde curls. How long, she wondered had it been since she had been above ground? Two, maybe three months?

'It's dying.'

Isobel slowly turned to look at her companion. 'You're sure?'

'Yes. I don't know why but it is. Without that genetic data from Grenfell the project is finished.'

The alien suddenly stopped shaking and seemed to look directly at the two humans.

'Roswell solution,' Isobel said.

'What? '

'Roswell solution. We keep the artefacts but let the creature die. If you don't find something to justify this project soon, I'll shut it down.'

'Stevenson will love that.'

She swung round and pinioned Parkinson against the wall. 'This is a local situation. The U.N. have not been informed. Do you understand me? No one else knows. No one else will ever know.'

She held Parkinson there for a few seconds then gently released the pressure. As the man sagged she repeated ominously, No one.'

Illuminated by the fluorescent glare of a portable lamp, the Doctor and David knelt by Marcus Stevenson's corpse. A bloodstained shovel lay beside the body and a group of people watched in the distance as the two men examined their former host.

'Well,' the Doctor muttered questioningly?

David shook his head. 'I'm a psychologist not a medical doctor. But it seems rather obvious that his skull was crushed.'

'Yes, even I can see that,' the Doctor snapped. 'I meant do you have thoughts about the situation we have here?'

David hesitated. 'I don't do this stuff any more, Doctor. Ever since Kate died, I've given up playing detective.'

For a moment he looked directly at the Doctor and, to his surprise, saw understanding and even a hint of acknowledgment in the alien's gaze.

'Marcus is still dead and, like it or not, he hasn't been dead for long.'

Standing up, the Doctor moved towards the group of onlookers. Danvers Carew stood next to Mel with a comforting hand on her shoulder. Next to them was James Lanyon, a younger man with light brown hair and an air of disease about him. He was quietly whispering to Judy Myers, who had discovered the body.

'We'll have to leave the body for the police to examine the scene properly but it is fairly obvious that foul play was involved.'

'It was the ghost.'

Everyone swung round to face Judy. Drawing a deep breath, she explained, 'There is a legend amongst the Stevenson family about a ghost who comes for the soul of the eldest male. Marcus was ill and he had been expecting to see the ghost for the last couple of days. It was almost as if he knew this was coming.'

The Doctor looked back towards where Marcus Stevenson lay.

'It wasn't a supernatural entity that did this,' he said. 'Ghosts don't use shovels.'

He paused, then brightly asked, 'Now shall we go in for dinner?'

Dinner was a quiet affair. Nobody really felt like eating, an occurrence that almost reduced the chef to tears, and half way through the police arrived. One by one they began to question everyone.

Mel watched as the group waited in the dining room, an uneasy silence filling the room. Nobody seemed willing to talk and an oppressive air of suspicion threatened to suffocate them all. Desperately she wished the Doctor were standing next to her but the police inspector had asked to speak with him in the other room.

'Worried?'

She looked up, startled to see David moving to sit next to her.

'Not really.' She stopped. Then, sensing that David might

understand, she began to confide in him. 'It's just that I get so tired of all the excitement. Do you ever wonder what it is all about? Whether the universe could go on living without you?'

'I'm sure it can,' David smiled. 'When I first met the Doctor I was enraptured with his chaos. My nice, steady life suddenly split open and there were all these possibilities for me. The Doctor taught me to explore what was around me rather than to search for excitement elsewhere.'

He hesitated then looked towards the room where the Doctor could be seen in deep conversation with the police.

'There's a sense of innocence about him that I find quite amazing. It's as if, after all he has seen, he still believes in the fundamental rightness of existence. Sometimes I've stayed awake at night wondering if I should have stowed away in the TARDIS. Not to have adventures or to see the universe but to protect him. To preserve that certainty. That faith in the goodness of people. There's a quote from Agatha Christie that says people don't become doctors to cure the sick. It's the disease that's most interesting to them. The Doctor stopped me believing that.'

Abruptly he changed the subject.

'What do you know about the other guests?'

'Not much,' she admitted. 'I know Judy met them at the railway station and that they work, worked, with Marcus.' She shivered. 'It's getting cool in here.'

David nodded, 'It's always been a cold house.'

'You know, you're right. And not just in temperature. It's sterile. There are no pictures, no family snapshots, no favourite paintings. Everything is so clean and tidy and organised. Except for the books. Usually when you come into a house, you get a sense of the personality of the person who lives there. But not here.'

Picking one of the myriad of titles from the shelves that covered the walls, David glanced at it distractedly. 'Marcus spends most of his time in London. He really only comes here to entertain.'

He looked around the barren walls.

'You can really believe that this place is haunted. The ghost probably spent more time here than Marcus.'

Before Mel could ask him what he thought about the ghost, the Doctor strode back into the room. As one of the police officers beckoned for David to follow him, the Doctor spotted Carew reading a newspaper and promptly 'borrowed' it from him.

Clutching his prize. he quickly honed in on Mel.

'Do you see it?'

Flushed with embarrassment, Mel pushed the Doctor into the corner of the room.

'I saw you just steal Danvers's paper.'

Blinking, the Doctor seemed surprised by Mel's critical tone.

'He can live without it for a few moments,' he said, dismissing Mel's complaints. 'There's hardly anything important or earth shattering about the information in here anyway.'

'Then why did you steal it?'

'Because it does have an important piece of information to us. The date. We're in 2005. Two whole years before David dies.'

'So, we're in the clear, then?'

'Except for trying to solve the case of the shovel wielding murderer.'

The Doctor would have continued except that a police officer asked if he and the young lady could spare a few moments. They had located Stevenson's laptop and wondered if either of the two visitors could help them access it.

'I say,' Carew called as they followed the officer out of the room. 'I don't suppose I could have my paper back?'

Professor Adrian Parkinson thought the Pacific Ocean was sloshing about in his head. Red welts festered on his blotched skin. Electronic rock by some guy called Jarre pummelled him from the speakers in the lab. Most of the others had fled or died. Only the need to know and the constant pain of the music as it pounded his body with every staccato beat kept him alive.

'I'm dying.'

The thought echoed throughout his mind, repeating itself in time with the rhythm until it started to form a new song of its own.

'Free me. Free me. Free me. '

The words danced in his imagination.

'Sod you, ' he replied.

Somewhere behind him the alien captive became frenzied, throwing its body at the Perspex walls.

'You are killing us. You killed them.'

'You are killing me.'

From out of nowhere a faint breeze began to play with Parkinson's hair. A faint hint of salt air added flavour to the air. Some part of his mind recognised that this was impossible. He was almost a mile underground in the middle of England not down at Brighton beach.

The beat increased, as did the prisoner's constant impacts on the walls.

No one would ever know. Parkinson looked at the alien who would share his tomb for all eternity.

'Serves you right,' he whispered.

But it did not know what had caused the human to die. Parkinson knew this without knowing how he knew. The thing couldn't even speak. No mouth, no voice box. Grenfell's studies had revealed that the creature absorbed nutrients from the air and water through its skin. It had not planned this. The recycled air of the underground lab had slowly starved it. Every time the air made another loop there were less and less nutrients for the process of osmosis to be effective.

Ironically some by-product of the creature's dying, some chemical excreted as it rotted away, was poisoning its captors.

'Cruel justice, ' Parkinson mocked. Suddenly he felt the flames of hell engulf his arm, his shoulder and then his torso. His consciousness exploded with excruciating agony.

The song reached a crescendo.

Parkinson's screams merged with the artificial reality of the music.

Armageddon,' he whispered. And died.

The Perspex wall shattered.

David glanced around the room. The group was collected in the main drawing room, huddled together as if to stave off any possible thoughts of sleep. With a slight grimace, he placed the book he was reading, an

original copy of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde courtesy of the TARDIS library, onto the coffee table next to his armchair. He had to admit it all made sense. The problem was, everything was only conjecture. They could have waited until they had some hard evidence, something concrete with which to make their accusations.

Instead, the Doctor had decided to bluff.

It was fitting, in a strange way, that someone who loved his books so much should have a drawing room ending. If everything went according to plan, and if he and the Doctor were right, Marcus Stevenson would receive his Agatha Christie style denouement. Seeing the Doctor gesturing for him to get on with it, David cleared his throat.

'What is truth,' he started before the Doctor brusquely cut him off.

'Somebody in this room murdered Marcus Stevenson. I know it wasn't myself or Mel and I believe it wasn't David or Judy. Which leaves us with two suspects.'

'According to your theory.' Danvers countered. 'I have yet to be convinced that an outsider could not have committed the crime. When the police return to continue their investigations tomorrow morning I very much doubt if they will be as willing to jump to conclusions as you appear to be.'

'Of course not,' replied the Doctor. 'They are, after all merely, human. The intuitive brilliance needed to adequately render this little conundrum solved has been trained out of them. Look at the facts that surround you. Marcus Stevenson was the government representative dealing with a company who collected and used alien artefacts for their own personal gain.'

James snorted with derision.

'Aliens. The next thing you'll be telling me is that the ghost actually killed him.'

'There are no such things as ghosts. At least, not what you mean by ghosts. Echoes, reverberations of the past, untravelled possibilities. These are your ghosts. Marcus' curse never existed. It was a myth. A device produced by a mind trying to cope with the reality of its actions.'

'You mean, he made it up?' Judy stared at the Doctor in bewilderment while James shifted uneasily in his chair.

'Of course,' replied David, taking the initiative again. 'There was no

200-year-old curse. There was no ghost walking around hitting people over the head with shovels. In fact, I think you'll find the ghost was a fairly recent addition to the Stevenson mythos. Probably about the same time he decided to have the change of heart that led to him being murdered. It is all a deliberately planned and brilliantly conceived set-up. There was no Stevenson family history or ancestral home.'

'In fact-' the Doctor said stealing David's thunder, '-there was no Marcus Stevenson.'

James jumped to his feet and started to march out of the room.

'Sit down.'

Carew's command echoed through the room like a bullet shot. The blustering old gentleman disappearing, replaced by a new, more confident facade.

'You are making some very interesting accusations, gentlemen. Let me see if I understand. The man who is lying dead in the gardens is not Marcus Stevenson and one of us knew this and killed him because he knew Stevenson was a fake.'

'You know-' he commented, turning to Lanyon, '-I think you are right. This farce has gone on long enough.'

'Indeed it has.'

The Doctor strode into the centre of the group. He looked directly at Carew with an intense glare that would have melted many other opponents. Carew held the gaze until finally, with a negligent shrug of his shoulders, he surrendered.

From a corner of the room David continued.

'Mel summed it up earlier when she said this was a sterile house. There is no personality because Marcus Stevenson was a fake, a lie, designed to hide his operations with your company.'

Again Lanyon seemed about to protest but a slight shake of Carew's head stopped him.

'It's all here,' David said, holding a floppy disk aloft. 'Twenty years ago, the man we know as Marcus Stevenson accepted a position from the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. He was required to change his name and was given the opportunity to create a new life for himself. And so he did. Inspired by his love of the classics, he created an aristocratic lawyer with a family curse as his new

persona and forced his staff to do the same. This romanticism was to become his downfall. In the end Marcus forgot this was all make-believe. He believed the ghost was coming to claim his life. Your stupid death threats made that all too believable.'

'Marcus' ghost was not a floating ball of ectoplasm but the actions of twenty years of conspiracy.'

It was time, the Doctor felt, to resume his role as the narrator.

'Even in this world of synchronicity, the chances of three people's names being related to the same book are astronomical.'

Carew stood up and wiped some crumbs from his jacket. He had argued against the names Marcus choose for their cover stories, but even now he did not quite see the connection.

'I do believe that just about covers it,' he said. 'Yes, in answer to your question, James, Marcus and I did work for the same organisation. Yes, it is possible that, when our superiors discovered Marcus was going to spill the beans, so to speak, they decided to send him threatening letters. Yes, it is even possible that one of us killed him. The problem-' he said, picking up his glass of sherry, '-is that neither of you have any idea or proof about which of us is the guilty party.'

He drained the remaining sherry and gently placed the crystal glass back on the table.

'Now, if you have both finished with your little bedtime stories, I think it's late enough and we should get some sleep. No doubt the Inspector will wish to speak with us all again in the morning.'

Mel waited for the Doctor to do something, to come out with the blinding flash of the obvious that would reveal the guilty party. Unfortunately, he could not. He had been hoping to force whoever had killed Marcus to make a stupid remark or to make a mistake. His Gallifreyan instinct told him Danvers Carew was the murderer. Something about the rawer emotionalism of Lanyon appealed to the Doctor. Besides the crime had been a cold, considered one. If Lanyon were the killer, the Doctor would have expected a less clinical approach.

'How can you live with yourself?'

Carew stopped as he approached the hallway.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You killed a man because he threatened your cosy existence. Do you know what your organisation does? Have you seen the evidence Marcus accumulated? Your company has murdered many more innocent people in the name of scientific advancement. These records prove you are one of the most amoral, self-serving organisations it has ever been my misfortune to come across. I warn you. I have brought down intergalactic tyrants and homicidal miscreants from a hundred worlds. I will defeat you.'

Carew laughed.

'Oh, bravo.' He clapped his hands together slowly. 'Encore. I say, an encore is definitely demanded. That was just so impassioned. The melodramatic pleading, the self-righteous fervour. Doctor that was most beautifully done. I am not, however, going to burst into tears or confess. Sorry.'

He gave a little bow of acknowledgment. A smile twitched on his face as he bade everyone a goodnight.

'Why did you lie about the paper,' David asked quietly.

'Haven't you given up yet? Bow down to your superiors, boy, and let me get some sleep.'

David refused to budge. In a stronger voice, he repeated his question.

Exasperated Carew snapped, 'I didn't lie about the paper. I brought it at the train station where I met Judy and James before we all got into the car and came here for what was to have been a relaxing evening. I've enjoyed the show but this has gone on long enough.'

Lunging quickly David blocked the door, preventing Carew from leaving.

'That's what you told us, what you told the police. You may have met them at the station but you did not arrive on the train, did you?'

This time Carew was silent.

'You brought the paper to explain why you met Judy and James after the train had disembarked. You needed an excuse as to why James saw you coming out of the station when you should have walked straight along the platform.'

Carew backed slowly away from David, back towards the centre of the room.

'You tried too hard. The truth is that you came here, you murdered Marcus Stevenson then drove back to the station, just in time to be met by Judy and James at the platform.'

'Prove it,' Carew snarled. The Doctor tensed. He recognised Carew's all-too-familiar tone of cornered desperation.

'Mel, what was the date on the paper?'

Startled from her position watching the confrontation with fascination, Mel shook her head to clear her senses. Then her prestigious memory kicked in.

'Saturday the 20th of August, 2005.'

'Which edition,' David demanded urgently.

Like a schoolgirl caught napping during class, Mel responded instantly, 'City, late edition.'

'So what?' Carew challenged warily, his confidence replaced by the caution of a caged animal.

'Bakerton Station only receives the early edition of the paper so that it is available for the morning commuters. They do not sell the late edition. You lied. Why would you lie except to provide yourself with an alibi or cover if someone asked about why you were not seen disembarking from the train?'

With the speed of cornered prey, Carew grabbed Mel and pushed something hard and metal against her skull. Nestling amongst her mane of thick red hair was the gun Carew had removed from his pocket.

'Get back.' He draped an arm around Mel's neck and forced her downwards. 'Stop struggling girl or I'll break your neck.'

Mel forced herself to relax, her large eyes pleading with the Doctor to do something. Meanwhile, Carew pointed the gun towards David.

'You ruined everything. The paper may have been a mistake, the police probably would have figured it out eventually. But it only had to last one day. Tomorrow, Danvers Carew could have disappeared into the sunset and no one would be the wiser. Now you'll pay for your interference.'

The Doctor hesitated, caught by indecision. He knew he could tackle Carew and save David. But could he do so in time to free Mel as well? Deep within his consciousness, some part of the Doctor, the part that believed in heroes and justice, the part that had caused him to rebel

and flee from a stagnant Gallifrey so many centuries ago, wondered whether he really wanted to save the young man. Was it not better for him to die this way than be hit by a speeding car in two year's time? The Doctor had already watched David die once. Surely it would be easier the second time?

But even as the thought flickered across his mind, he discarded it. Time was too fragile to be treated in so cavalier a fashion. Images of half-remembered, half-repressed senseless, useless deaths besieged him. Katrina. Adric. Poor doomed Oscar. Even Lytton and Orcini, dying their deaths of honour, were still dead. Their bodies digested in the stomach of time. How many times, he wondered to himself, had he been in this situation?

'You do not need to do this,' the Doctor said out loud. 'Simply let them go and we'll let you walk out that door. Maybe you'll escape and maybe the police will track you down. I cannot see your future. But I know this must cease. Marcus saw it too. There have been too many deaths already.'

'Nonsense, Doctor. It would have been cruel for us to preserve the creatures out of sentiment. They were wounded-'.

'By your experiments,' The Doctor snapped.

'Granted. But they were far from their homes with no chance of returning. No, it was kinder for us to destroy them. Once we had no further use for them, of course.'

Forgetting the situation in his outrage, the Doctor stepped angrily towards Carew. A scream of pain from Mel forced him to stop. Breathing deeply, he began to speak again, his voice cold and chillingly controlled.

'They were sentient beings and you treated them like glorified lab rats.'

From her place on the couch Judy watched, mesmerised by the scene in front of her.

'I cannot believe Marcus would be a party to this,' she said.

'He wasn't,' James replied. 'Marcus only found out how we mined the information and technology near the end of his time with the company.'

'He was a blind fool,' Carew snapped. 'More than willing to take

advantage of the edge the alien technology gave us but too squeamish to accept the means of acquiring that information. He actually thought we had negotiated a secret treaty with the creatures.'

Carew laughed, and sensing an opportunity, the Doctor motioned for David to stay still. In addition to everything else he had to ensure the young man did not do anything rash.

'They were mercy killings really.'

'Mercy killings? Just because your species has a xenophobic inability to accept anything that doesn't conform, you insist on slaughtering living beings.'

'I grew up on a farm,' Carew continued, ignoring the Doctor's interruption. 'When I was twelve I had a favourite horse called Old Ned. We'd go for rides across the paddock and he'd love nothing more than to gallop across the open land. One day, Ned's hoof got caught on something and he fell. I was okay but Ned had broken his leg. Dad made me get the shotgun and watched as I pulled the trigger. Kinder that way. You could not force a horse to stay off its feet. If I'd let him go on, if I'd let him suffer, then the compassionate liberals such as you would have been demanding my scalp for that.'

'Those creatures weren't horses. They were intelligent living beings.' The Doctor could feel the atmosphere changing in the room. Carew, he realised, wasn't completely amoral. He knew there were boundaries but was rationalising his actions into acceptability. Mentally he prepared himself for the moment. 'What you did was cold blooded murder.'

'No. It was humane. I would not have let a dog live the way the scientists treated those creatures. If you had seen the welts and bruises. By the end, they were insane. I'd have shot a mad bear or dog as readily as I shot those creatures.'

This was it, the Doctor thought to himself, sensing a crack forming in Carew's veneer. He just had to build his justifications up just a little bit more.

'Would you have shot a mad person?'

'No. But then they weren't human, were they?'

Now.

'Marcus was.'

Danvers froze unable to respond quickly enough. A slight sliver of

doubt crept across his features and, for the briefest of moments, the Doctor had penetrated his armour. Even as the Doctor began to move towards him, he could see the hole closing as Carew's mind formulated justifications for his actions.

Out of the corner of his eye the Doctor saw David tense and, in a moment of almost precognitive recognition, he saw the young man leap at Carew. Time slowed and splintered as Carew's finger tightened on the trigger. Reacting instantly the Doctor threw himself at Carew, vainly hoping to try and knock the bullet off course before Carew could pull the trigger.

He failed.

Both the Doctor and David, momentum carrying him forward, crashed into Carew at the same time. The shock of the collision sent Mel sprawling as well and the four people ended up in tangled mess on the floor.

Picking up the gun from the floor where it had dislodged, James Lanyon aimed it at the Doctor.

'Get out of the way,' he ordered. 'Are you okay, Danvers?' Unable to answer, the winded man nodded and started to get to his feet.

Lanyon stepped over David's prostrate body.

'We're leaving now.' He gestured to the laptop and his voice softened. 'You can keep this, however. The company is finished after this anyway.'

He would have said more but David's leg rose sharply between Lanyon's own, causing him to scream in pain and drop the gun.

This time it fell at Mel's feet.

'I think the tables have finally turned,' she said.

The creature lay, exhausted, on the floor of the laboratory. Shattered Perspex covered the splintered wood and twisted metal of the room like a faint sheet of snow. Parkinson's body looked like a puppet whose strings had been cut. It was dying. Weeks of imprisonment, starved from the refreshing rays of sunlight and the nutrients of the open air that its body needed to synthesize energy, had left it unable to drag its body towards the lift.

Even now, in the final moments of its life, the alien could feel the

addictive pull of the sun's kind grasp reaching out and trying to lift it towards the open air.

Hope leapt in the alien's heart as the lift doors opened and it managed a burst of movement towards freedom. Then the bullets slammed into its body, finally and conclusively ending its life.

'Poor thing,' muttered Danvers Carew. Dressed in white environmental protection suits, he and his companion looked like futuristic spaceman exploring the moon. Poking Parkinson's body with the toe of his boot, Carew shrugged.

'He'd dead. Let 's torch this place and get out.'

As he went about setting the explosives that would obliterate the laboratory, he failed to notice his companion bend down and pick up a CD from the floor. Placing it carefully into his carry bag, Marcus Stevenson realised that he had been manipulated from the start. As he leant over the dead alien he failed to notice a slight tear in the glove of his protection suit. Gently he closed the alien's eyes and a drop of liquid slowly sank through the hole.

No one realised it but Marcus Stevenson had begun to die.

More slowly than Parkinson but just as inevitably, the alien toxin invaded his immune system, slowly slaughtering the white cell soldiers that tried to fight off the infection.

'Ready,' Carew asked, bringing him back to the moment.

Taking one final look around the devastation.

'Oh, yes. I'm ready. '

'What I don't understand-' Mel said, reaching for a glass of wine, '-is how you avoided being shot?'

The police had taken the two criminals away and everyone was relaxing in the drawing room. The chef had prepared a selection of cold cuts and the Doctor was noisily wolfing down some roast lamb.

'This really is delicious,' he said to no one in particular. You are sure nobody else wants some?'

David raised a quizzical eyebrow towards Mel and Judy before shaking his head. Picking up the discarded gun, he pointed it directly at Mel.

'It was easy,' he said, pulling the trigger. 'All you have to do is remove the bullets beforehand.'

Mel burst into a fireball of indignation.

'You mean you knew it was empty all the time?'

'Oh yes. I removed the bullets when the police were questioning Danvers earlier this evening. I'd followed him to his room after dinner and saw him hide the gun. He probably didn't want the police to have any reason to suspect him. I, of course, already did. What with the assumed names and him lying about the paper he was already my number one suspect.'

Feeling a bit like the one person who couldn't spot the murderer in an Agatha Christie novel, Mel admitted she didn't quite understand all that stuff about the names.

'Jekyll and Hyde,' replied the Doctor. 'James Lanyon and Danvers Carew were both characters from The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde written by-'

'Robert Louis Stevenson,' Mel finished.

'It was his little joke. Quite fitting too, Just like inventing a ghost story to ensure someone investigated his death, the whole Jekyll and Hyde thing was a massive hint.'

'You mean, the ghost story would have ensured someone looked into his death even if he had died calmly in his sleep,' Judy asked.

The Doctor nodded his head.

'Precisely. Marcus always was a bit of detective buff. And, of course, the whole hidden identity, people not being who they said they were, motif from Jekyll and Hyde was a pure stroke of Stevenson.'

'Those penny dreadfuls are a dime a dozen these days,' quipped David, ignoring the look he received from the Doctor.

'Despite David's failed attempt at levity, this has been quite a literary night. A drawing room confrontation a la Ms Christie and a solid application of the little grey cells.'

Judy nodded, reaching for the wine decanter.

'And just like Agatha Christie, your facts didn't actually have to stand up to close scrutiny.'

David and the Doctor looked at her, shocked.

'What do you mean,' they demanded together.

'Well, in many Agatha Christie stories the detective, whether it be Poirot, Miss Marple, or Tommy and Tuppence, doesn't come up with any hard evidence. Instead they produce a reasonable sounding argument that convinces the murderer or thief or whoever to confess. She always used to say that people are guilty and the guilty sow the seeds of their own destruction.'

She offered Mel another glass of wine.

'Of course, she also admitted that sometimes there just wasn't enough space in a short story to provide a really detailed analysis otherwise no one would read it. Too much psychology, not enough action, you know.'

Mel laughed. Tomorrow she and the Doctor would disappear, resuming their journey. Strangely enough she found herself looking forward to it. At least murder on exotic planets offered the chance to meet aliens.

'Not enough action,' she repeated. 'With the amount of action we seem to encounter I'm amazed you still have that spare tyre around your stomach. First thing tomorrow we must get you back on a decent diet and exercise regime.'

She smiled at the Doctor's affronted expression.

'You know rich food doesn't agree with you.'

Choking back a laugh, David tried to change the subject.

'There's one thing I don't understand.' He turned and faced the Doctor. 'Why didn't you say anything about the paper?'

'Because I did not know about it. I cannot be expected to know every little idiosyncrasy of the English rail system.'

David nodded slowly.

'That's what I thought. So tell me, Doctor. What was so important about the paper that you snatched it from Carew then? What secret did it hold?'

The maybe man watched the departing figure with a grimace of distaste. Despite their hold over him, he found the ridiculous bone masks and petty scheming left him feeling soiled. One more prank, they had said. Just another lever to be used when the time came. Little did they understand the true mischievousness of time.

He closed his eyes and felt the pathways of probability settle. The Doctor had chosen another adventure for his defence. With a sweeping gesture he summoned a picnic table and meal from the air. Pulling out a seat, he sat down and reached for a sandwich. As he ate, he opened the paper.

Sunday, November the 11th, 2007. One day after David Holmes died after being hit by a speeding car.

With a hint of nervous anticipation, the maybe man opened the paper to the death notices.

And wondered what names he would see.

Iris Explains

LANCE PARKIN

'Doctor, hello. Darling.'

The Doctor didn't notice the bus. Not at first. In a few seconds time, he would see it -- a huge gleaming old-fashioned red London double-decker bus sitting on his drive, as resplendent as all those adjectives would suggest. It would be later still, almost an hour, before it occurred to him that it couldn't possibly have fit through the iron gates to get onto the drive. And it would be a day or two later, after the bus had gone, that he would notice that there were no tyre tracks in the gravel. Such a state of affairs would have seemed impossible to most people. But even as he didn't see the tracks, if you get my drift, the Doctor would come up with three perfectly good theories as to how the bus had got, then how it had ungot, there.

The least likely explanation -- that the bus had just appeared out of thin air - was the only plausible one. Where was the crane?

Why would a bus just fall out of the sky? But that didn't concern the Doctor at that moment, and it needn't concern us. His attention was drawn to the woman, for reasons which will soon become apparent.

When Miranda saw her -- which wasn't for a minute or two --she would immediately recognise the woman. It was, after all, the mid-eighties, give or take a year. Jane Fonda's workout book sat unread on four million coffee tables. And this woman looked remarkably like Jane Fonda. In all the universe of time and space, there weren't actually that many places where people would remark on the similarity. A few decades of Earth's history. Even then, not everyone on Earth would make the connection.

But Miranda would.

When Iris saw Miranda, by coincidence, she would also see a strong resemblance to a film star. At sixteen, Miranda bore a striking resemblance to the young Jodie Foster. Miranda often got told she looked like her, although she was taller, and had blonde hair.

Fortunately, for the sake of all concerned and the maintenance of the suspension of disbelief, neither Iris nor Miranda had seen *The Monocled Mutineer*, and none of them ever watched BBC 1 on Saturday evenings.

The Doctor looked the woman up and down. She had cascades of golden hair, big brown eyes and full lips. But even the Doctor was paying more attention to her outfit. It looked like it vas made from crocodile skin, but -- for a very good reason -- that the crocodile in question had come from a place where the crocodiles were made from florescent PVC. Perhaps with a nod to animal rights, there wasn't very much to the outfit. Her arms were bare, and the skirt stopped... well, not to be indelicate, but it ended with a fringed hem that petered out barely below her waist, making her long legs look almost unreasonably long. Most men would have noticed that the skirt hardly concealed her rather special knickers, but the Doctor may not have done - who can say what he thinks? She wore matching calf-length green boots, which looked relatively practical by comparison.

'Do I know you?' the Doctor asked.

Had anyone else asked, this would have been a rhetorical question. But, for reasons that will shortly become transparent, the Doctor genuinely didn't know the answer.

Iris Wildthyme laughed warmly, then introduced herself. 'You had better come in,' he suggested. It was only then that he noticed her suitcase.

She dragged it into the hall. 'This is a lovely place,' she told him. 'Still got the police box, I notice.' She jerked a thumb over her shoulder back towards the garden.

'You know about that? What is it?'

'Oh dear, it really is serious amnesia, isn't it? You're prone to it. aren't you, m'dear?'

'Am I? I've forgotten.'

Iris clapped her hands together and laughed. 'But you've not lost your gift for a witty comeback. Excellent! Oh yes, this is the -- what? -- third time you've lost your memory, isn't it? Or is it the fourth? I forget. You'll get a reputation, you know. People always like a quick

description: 'the one with a shock of white hair', 'the one with the recorder', 'the one who was only in a charity thing for a few seconds but was the best of the damn lot'. You'll be 'the one who loses his memory all the time' if you're not careful. I say ... who's this?'

It was Miranda. She'd come downstairs from her room after hearing the commotion. And you know what she looked like, because I've already described her.

'School uniform,' Iris said, nudging the Doctor. 'You always had a thing for it. All those companions dressed to look half their age. This one's no different. How old are you, love? Twenty seven going on fifteen? You don't have to do what this horrid man says, you know. What's your name?'

'I'm Miranda.'

Iris shook her hand vigorously. 'Pleased to meet you. Do you have a surname, or are you one of the ones that doesn't?'

Miranda told Iris her surname. Now, don't get upset, or write letters, but what she said was: 'I'm Miranda Who. The Doctor's daughter. I'm wearing a school uniform because I've just got in from school.'

Iris looked at her, then looked at the Doctor. 'Great Gallifrey!' she said, then clamped her hand on her mouth. 'Sorry. Not allowed any more. Rassilon's Rod! No ... er gorblimey flipping 'eck, professor. Does that count as one?' she asked, looking up at the ceiling.

The Doctor frowned. 'One what?'

Iris shushed him, and hesitated for a moment. 'No. Got away with it. Daughter, eh? That's got to be quite a story. One unsuited to the short story medium, I would wager.'

'It would take a whole book,' the Doctor agreed. 'Or at least the first hundred and twenty nine pages or so of one, to get to this bit. I'll explain later.'

Iris beamed. 'I'm sure you will. I was forgetting your *other* reputation. You know,' she nudged him. 'The one that ... y'know.'

'I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about.'

Iris tapped her nose. 'Mum's the word about her mum. I'm not here so you can explain things to me, I'm here to sort a few things out for you. Tie up any loose ends. Jog the memory. You're caught on Earth at

the mo, aren't you? Have you got the note?'

'You know about the note?'

'I know the man who wrote it. In fact I very nearly had carnal knowledge of him. He spent a very long time trying to get into my knickers.'

'Perhaps he was just after the diamonds,' said Miranda, who had noticed, even if the Doctor hadn't, that Iris's pants were black satin, studded with just the right number of gemstones, whatever that number may be.

'Oh no, his intentions were entirely dishonourable,' Iris told Miranda, making her blush. She was so embarrassed, in fact, that she didn't ask her next question -- *why are the diamonds arranged in a question mark?* -- and so she never discovered that they'd been a gift from a gentleman admirer. Neither did Miranda ask her third question, but that was just a flippant one about washing instructions and garment care.

Iris returned her full attention to the Doctor. 'I can tell you everything you're a bit hazy on.'

'Er ... will that take long?'

'Oh yes. Weeks, probably. Have you got a spare room?'

'Six.'

'Oh. Shame. Come on, then, let's get cracking.'

Ten minutes later, Miranda brought a tray full of tea things into the front room. On it were an antique pot, cups and saucers in the finest bone china, and some Kipling cakes, which the Doctor was rather partial to. Don't worry, that's not a continuity reference or an in-joke, no need to look it up. He just liked the taste.

The Doctor and Iris were on the sofa, and while most men would be looking up Iris's skirt, the Doctor was just looking puzzled.

'So did that happen or not?' the Doctor asked.

'Did what happen?'

'Well, if time wasn't allowed to run its true course, then that means--
'

'Do you honestly not know what a paradox is?' Iris asked, exasperated. 'They were *called* Paradox. Wasn't that a big enough clue? Really, I didn't think I'd have to explain all the big and difficult

words to you.'

'A self-contradictory or seemingly absurd statement,' Miranda declared.

'Exactly,' Iris concluded smugly.

'So you're saying what happened was self-contradictory?'

'Yes. Unequivocally.'

'Unequivocally paradoxical?' Miranda asked. 'Isn't that itself a paradox?'

Iris beamed. '*She* understands, you see?'

'I don't,' Miranda admitted.

'But you do. Don't you see? It makes no sense, it makes sense, get used to it.'

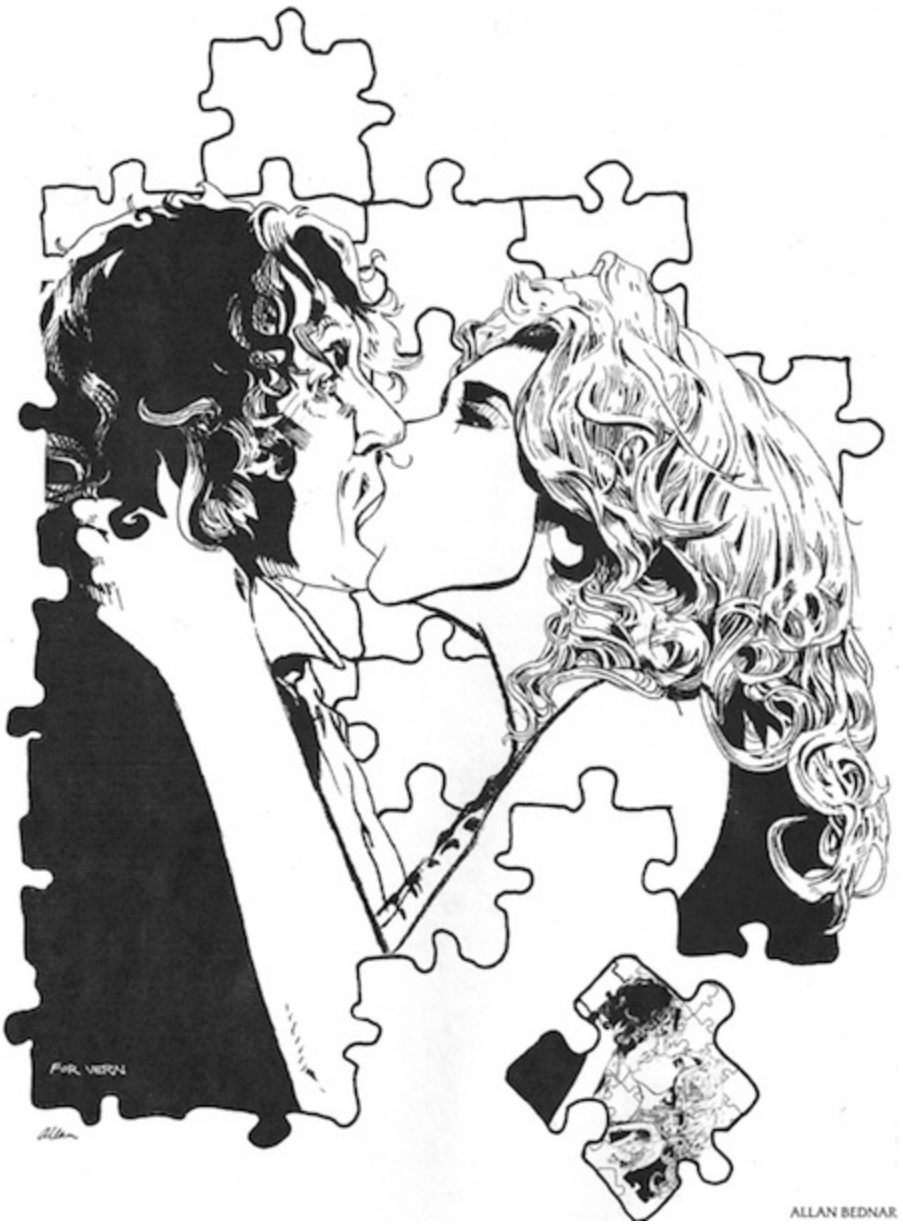
The Doctor scowled. 'Look can we go back a bit?'

'If you want. How far back do you go, Doctor? I'll take you back. Back to your beginning! Back! Back!'

'Why are you waving your arms like that?'

'Just adding to the atmosphere, Miranda, dear.'

'Why did I lose my memory?' the Doctor asked.



'Ah.' Iris shut up, for possibly the first time since she'd arrived.

'That's all I want to know,' said the Doctor. 'A blow to the head? A psychological trauma? Some sort of machine that worked as a mind rubber?'

'Well, none of the above. You just sort of did.'

'*Just sort of did*?' the Doctor echoed. 'That's not an explanation at all.'

'Look, I don't know about that bit, to be honest. I'd got confused by then, and I think I might have skipped a few bits. It's got something to

do with the choice you made. When you fought the Grandfather.'

Miranda laughed. 'My dad beat up a pensioner?'

'No,' the Doctor said, 'he wasn't really a grandfather. He was me, but me with short hair. I think.'

'For the last time, it wasn't just the hair. He was a future you. An evil you. Only that future doesn't happen, now. He might have been you from a parallel universe. Obviously he was from a parallel timestream, one that no longer happened, but he may have been a you from a parallel timestream *within* a parallel universe where things happened differently, until, of course, you did whatever you did so that they happened the same. But that itself may have originally been a distinct parallel continuity, one where you lived at home and mourned for your dead wife. If the Grandfather wasn't that you, then he certainly went to the same barbers. But the status of that you is still up in the air. I had thought he was a future you, but events have rather ruled that out. Unless events transpire to restore, y'know, *thingy* but if that - happened you would almost certainly not be you any more.

You'd be that new you. But that you wasn't an evil you. So that you may have been a version of one of the origin story ones, you know, the one where Borusa's your spirit guide. That would make him -- you, that is, or rather that particular you, not you you -- a pre-canonical you, rather than a post-canonical one. Assuming of course that he's canonical in the first place. But we have to assume that, otherwise you might as well say that nothing need make any sense at all.' Iris clarified helpfully.

'Heaven forfend,' the Doctor replied. 'So who's Izzy again?'

Iris rolled her eyes. 'Forget Izzy. Forget Charley. Forget Benny ... no, wait, remember Benny.'

'I don't remember Benny,' the Doctor said.

'Right. Well which one don't you remember?'

'Pardon?'

'It's OK if you don't remember the one that went to Guernsey without you. It's OK if you don't remember the one that travelled with you you, except for that one time in 1997, who you dropped off at Dellah in 2593. I'm not sure where the one who fought the Scourge

with you fits in. You can probably remember that one if you want, I doubt it really matters.' Iris turned to Miranda. 'I've just had a terrible thought. Your mum wasn't called Benny, was she?'

'Benny's a woman?' the Doctor asked.

'Doctor, you had thirteen children with her, and you don't even -- forget I said that. You didn't do that. You didn't even ... oh wait, you did. The once. Or was that in a different bottle altogether?'

'Bottle?' Miranda asked.

'I'll explain later,' Iris said cheerfully. Then her face fell. 'No, sod that, I never understood all that business with the bottles. Forget the bottles. Forget most of the Bennys. A quick rule of thumb -- if she doesn't look like Emma Thompson, you can forget it.'

'Well, that certainly helps,' the Doctor said sardonically.

'That's what I'm here for,' Iris replied. 'Miranda dear, could you pour that tea? I think we're in for a long night.'

A Time To Choose

OLNIA JAMES

Then:

He holds my hand, laughs gently and tells me that I walk like a woman.

I bite my lip, refrain from stating the obvious, and walk onwards; the wind whips around me as I walk from now to when.

Part of me believes that I am doing this myself, part of me believes that he is in control, and part of me...

Part of me loses control, and I feel a wrenching.

Now:

Sometimes, when it is quiet of an afternoon, when all the punters are back in their offices after lunch, I doodle. Nothing good, you understand. Dogs, mainly. Sometimes with legs, sometimes not. Davey likes the ones without legs, but I think they look kind of odd. I fold up the paper afterwards, watching the dogs chase each other in new configurations. Little origami boxes, with other little origami boxes inside them.

Today, we've just got a tramp in the café. Tall, stocky, wild hair and a big overcoat. I notice that he's unusual as soon as he walks through the door. He's looking around him, sniffing the air. He doesn't focus on anything, but it feels like he's searching for something very specific. His eyes have a feral look to them, and he has a short, snub nose and narrow lips. He orders tea.

I am aware of the passage of time.

He sips his tea with intensity, the chipped mug gripped in powerful, labourer's hands. It's a quiet afternoon, and I'm feeling generous, so I offer him a re-fill for some company. He growls a thank you.

'You're welcome,' I say, tucking my hair behind my ears. Davey keeps telling me to tie it back, for Health and Safety, but I just smile sweetly and ignore him. Stubbornness is one of my more endearing qualities.

The tramp pulls the sugar bowl towards him and drops a single lump into the mug. The impact of the splash reverberates inside my skull, so loudly I think I'm going to faint. To steady myself, I pretend to be wiping the table.

I watch the sugar as it dissolves, its structure vanishing, order transformed into disorder as each molecule slides into the murky warmth of the tea. Entropy. One way time. No going back.

'But sometimes there is a second chance,' he says in a thick slightly guttural voice.

'What?' I stare at him, sure I hadn't spoken aloud.

He frowns, as if he finds speech hard. 'You cannot remake the sugar lump, but other steps can be retraced. Things can be undone. Set to rights.' He moves the mug in steady, circular motions, swilling sweetness throughout the tea.

'To set things to rights -- surely we have to remember what went wrong.' Steam from the teapot in my hand spirals upwards between us; through the obscuring cloud I watch him, watching me, his unkempt hair and beard framing his face like a mane.

Leonine. The word pops unbidden into my head. I try to beat it down but it dodges free.

This guy is a cut above the usual down-and-outs we get in the café; the ones who try to cadge a cup of tea for 10p. I lecture them on the effect of inflation and the strength of the pound, but will they listen? Oh no. This one is prouder than the rest, holding his head up with a touch of arrogance, his broad shoulders square within the threadbare coat. He may have fallen on hard times, but he's fighting back. He's searching for a way out. And, from the way he's looking at me, he reckons he's found it.

I flick my hair back again, nervously this time. He frowns at the gesture, as if it stirs a memory within him that he can't quite place.

'And can you remember?' he asks, squinting at my name badge. 'Romy. Do you feel that something went wrong?'

'That's a very philosophical question for so early in the afternoon,' I joke lightly, sitting down opposite him and placing the teapot in the middle of the table. I find customers are less likely to make a grab for me if they're liable to scald themselves in the process.

As I arrange myself comfortably on the chair, something falls out of my skirt pocket and onto the floor. The tramp and I both stare down at it, at the little origami box with dogs chasing one another's tails from face to face, getting slower and slower as it rolls to a halt by his right boot. A leather boot, I notice, somewhat shabby at the toe but lovingly polished. Time pauses for an instant. A very long instant.

'My name,' he says, 'is Lazlo.' Instantly, I pigeonhole him as an Eastern European. Something about him reeks of royalty fallen on hard times, as though destiny once meant him to be somewhere else, but the world moved in unpredictable ways.

'Pleased to meet you,' I reply automatically. He growls something that I can't make out, and we share a moment of silence.

'I couldn't help noticing,' I continue, 'but when you came in, I thought you were looking for something.'

'Not something, someone.'

He looks down at the tea, cupped in his massive hands. I look down at my own hands.

'That's what I do. I walk, I look for someone, I walk on.'

I let that one hang in the air for a moment, before I ask him who he is looking for. He doesn't reply, but we both look up, and our eyes meet. He thinks that he is looking for me. I can read it in his face. It doesn't make any sense, but he thinks that he is looking for me.

'I don't know,' he says, and I focus on his mouth, his sharp white teeth. 'But I will know when we meet.'

I exhale, suddenly aware that I have been holding my breath.

We talk for almost an hour, before the late afternoon bacon sandwich rush arrives. We talk about his childhood, growing up in Estonia, about his brothers back home, breaking free from their oppressors. I share the story of my family, back in Sussex. My father, rich but reclusive, my closeted childhood, locked away from the world in my stately home. Stately? The place was in a permanent state of decay.

'Everything changes, Romana,' he says, then he reaches forward, but I pull my hands away before he can place his hand over mine.

'I don't like being touched.' The words sound feeble, and my voice sounds small.

'Very well.'

A customer has arrived -- one of the workmen from the building site across the road. I push my chair back, and go to serve him. He is looking at my breasts as I make his sandwich, and I try to return nothing except a haughty air of indifference. I am aware of Lazlo, still sitting at the table, tossing a coin. This is not the best day I have had this week.

I am kept busy for maybe ten minutes -- bacon sandwiches and weak milky tea for eight. At some point, Lazlo leaves. He doesn't say goodbye, and this annoys me, but more than anything it concerns me.

Later, as I lie in my bed, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling, I can still picture him, and he is in my mind when I drift off to sleep.

My dreams are of strange, fantastic places. Worlds within boxes, rocks that move by themselves, cities of smoke and empires of fire. I dream of winds of time that flow through everything, changing the world around them, writing and rewriting history.

The next day, Lazlo is back.

'You must really like my tea,' I comment, pouring him out a mug without being asked. It is the same mug, with the same chipped rim. He sits at the same table.

'I couldn't keep away.'

From one of my regular customers this would be a joke, a bit of flirtatious banter. I'd respond with an aloof sniff, or a girlish giggle if I liked the sparkle in his eyes.

But with Lazlo it is a simple statement of fact, and I am lost for words.

My fmgers tremble, and I spill some tea on the Formica tabletop. Hastily I mop it up with a cloth. As if sensing he's pushed me too far, Lazlo switches his gaze to the picture hanging on the adjacent wall.

A couple of years ago, the café's owner tried to take us more upmarket, introducing cappuccinos, croissants and little curly biscuits. Before our customers rebelled and demanded the reinstatement of the deep-fat fryer, he invested in a whole series of posh prints; sepia-tinted floor plans and elevations of classical country houses and museums. One of the plans always makes me homesick, with its warren-like maze of corridors and rooms that seem to change position every time I

look at it.

Lazlo is sitting next to a print of a formal garden, with a statue-topped fountain standing at the end of a gravel walk bounded by thick hedges. Its clean lines and white background clash with the grubby beige of the café walls. Lazlo's gaze wanders over it like a caress.

'When I was young,' he says, 'my brothers used to tell me a story - a legend, you would call it here. How certain people, gifted people, could walk through a picture frame and into another world. To them, the contents of this picture would be as real as where we are now.'

I look at his reflection in the glass that covers the print. His eyes are bright, almost glowing. I see myself, my lips slightly parted. I look very young, and very scared.

'My father told me a similar story once,' I reply. 'Some legends appear in every culture; vampires, shapeshifters, monsters. My father said they're like race memories, buried so deep inside us that we've almost forgotten they're there.'

'But memories are real, are they not? They aren't just stories, made up to entertain the children.' He shifts in his seat and takes another sip of tea. 'I see pictures in my mind, Romana. Images like this print. I have memories of moving between them --somehow. Can you understand that?'

I think of my dreams, being buffeted by searing winds and unknown forces, spinning helplessly in a void.

'I...'

'You were there,' he murmurs wonderingly, as if something is clawing its way to the surface of his thoughts. 'The last time. The lost time.'

'No!' My vehemence shocks me, and startles the four burly men in the corner who have been drowning their hangovers in fry-ups and Lucozade. 'I don't do that. I don't get lost. I don't lose control. I can't...'

'Romana...' He reaches out a huge hand and I flinch away involuntarily.

'Hey!' One of the men from the corner table swaggers over. Is this tramp bothering you, love?'

I'm on my own this morning. Davey has phoned in sick again. Too much clubbing.

'No, I'm fine. He's no trouble. Thank you.'

'You sure? He sounds foreign to me; maybe he's one of that asylum lot. He paid for that tea yet?'

Behind him his three friends stand up, pushing away their empty plates, flexing their fingers.

Lazlo sniffs the air like a giant cat, scenting the man's aggression. Slowly he rises to his feet, a tall, proud man in a shabby coat and scuffed boots. He's strong, I know he is strong, but he's tired and weak and no match for four.

The first man pushes Lazlo, and he stumbles, falling backwards into a crumpled yet defiant mess of limbs.

'Leave him alone,' I say. It's a quiet but assertive phrase. I step between the man and his prey, wiping the grease from my palms on to my apron. My hair is loose about my shoulders like a shield. I hope they appreciate my threat.

'Leave him alone,' I repeat. 'And get out.'

They laugh at me, but I meet their leader's glare, holding it defiantly, daring him to back down.

'Come on, lads,' he says at last.

I watch them, head held high, until they are out of the café, out of sight. Sometimes, I think, you have to take a stand. You have to draw a line, make a choice. Fight for something you believe in.

Lazlo is still on the floor, and I reach down to help him up. Our fingers meet, and then our eyes. 'Come, my lady. Let us go home,' says the Tharil.

I put my life behind me, take his hand and walk out into the winds again.

Waste

Daniel Blythe

The fog is mustard-yellow and thick, shrouding a spiky, twisted landscape. Thorny plants and bulbous trees fight for space on the mud, hiding most of the feeble light, while scarlet fronds brush the bubbling marshes. The fog is like a living thing as it snakes through the forest, frothing and coiling around the dying vegetation. In the velvet sky, a milky splash of constellations hints at other worlds. This is not a place which acknowledges their existence.

And then a light shines. Harsh and blue, like an industrial lamp, it slices the yellow fog to shreds where it touches it. The rotating light sits on top of a tall, battered blue box.

A man emerges from the box. Small, scruffy, with a mop of dark hair, he looks incongruous against the landscape. He holds a red, white-spotted handkerchief up to his nose and mouth as he looks around, nodding to himself and making quiet, ruminative noises.

'Yes, well,' he says after a few seconds, 'I think it seems quite safe to come out. Nothing, ah, actually *poisonous* as such.'

'But noxious, none the less, Doctor,' says his companion disapprovingly, as she follows him out. 'And chilly, too, I would point out.' She shivered.

'Ah, well, you know, Zoe, one can't have everything, can one?' The Doctor frowns as if contemplating some deep truth, then opens his eyes wide, his eyebrows zooming upwards as his ageless face breaks into a mischievous smile, 'Exotic alien planets are very rarely, ah, comfortable for non-indigenous life-forms.'

'Non-what?' mutters the young Scotsman behind them, looking carefully where he was putting his feet as he squelches out of the box. He is carrying a bulky greatcoat festooned with military badges — he slips it over Zoe's shoulders and she smiles gratefully, putting it on over her silvery dress.

'The Doctor means people who don't live here, Jamie.' Zoe

murmurs, looking around. 'Although it looks as if nobody lives here at all.'

'Aye.' Jamie's expression is resolute. 'Doctor, I dinnae like this place. It reeks of death.'

'Ahh, that's where you might be wrong, Jamie...' The Doctor, some way ahead, doesn't turn round. He is absently blotting the handkerchief round one hand and holding the fingers of the other up against the thick fog as if testing its consistency. 'It smells of *decay*. Not, ah, the same thing. At all.'

'It isn't?' Zoe is confused too.

'No, no. You see, decay can also mean... change.' The Doctor taps his nose.

– I, as the interrogator, will ask you for your name. You will answer. I will then ask you further questions concerning your implication in the event. You will answer these fully and clearly. Any attempt to withhold answers will be seen as an infraction of law. Is that understood?

– Yes.

– What is your name?

– My name is Operative Saskyll.

– What was your most recent assignment?

– I served under Captain Tralvin on the deep space probe Lethe.

– And what were your specific duties?

– I was required, along with Operative Joslyn, to monitor the final gestation of the LifePod.

– And did you succeed in this task?

– I... The task...

– Operative Saskyll? I would remind you of the undertaking you gave to relay all the relevant information. Reluctance to answer will not help your case. I ask again: did you succeed in this task?

– No.

– So, then, we may conclude that you failed?

– Yes. I failed in the task.

– Thank you. Now, if I may, I would like to enter into the specifics of the assignment.

– *Very well.*

The Doctor pushes aside a tangle of creeper and pauses to mop his brow. Behind him, Zoe coughs as she finds herself breathing the pungent fog, and Jamie folds his arms belligerently.

'All right, Doctor. I've just about had enough o' this dismal planet!'

'Yeeeesss,' says the Doctor, with a distant tone in his voice, as if he is responding to a totally different comment. 'I rather think so, Jamie.'

'Doctor,' says Zoe, 'what were you saying earlier? About change and decay?'

The Doctor bends down, rubs some of the mud between his fingers. 'Just going to... test a theory,' he says softly, and starts to rummage in his pockets. He piles up a ball of string, a compass and an Ordnance Survey map on the muddy ground in front of him. Then, his eyes light up with childish glee as he pulls out the object he has evidently been looking for. It is like a small telescope, but with a plastic bulb on the wider end. 'I always wondered if this would come in useful,' he murmurs absently, and then points it, bulb end down, at the ground. The bulb splits in half, scoops up some of the soil and re-seals itself, then starts to glow, buzzing quietly. The Doctor peers in at the narrow end. 'Yes,' he says. 'Yes, quite fascinating!'

– Tell me about the LifePod.

– It was a secret project. Our scientists had been working on it for years. The encapsulation of our purest form. The ultimate... mutation of our race.

– But some would say mutation was the wrong word.

– Yes, no doubt some would. They had made genetic... refinements. Pursued avenues which were, obviously, possible directions for the development of our race, but ignored other possible developments. Other aspects.

– Aspects which you felt were important?

– Yes.

– Tell me, Operative Saskyll... where exactly on the ship was LifePod housed?

– In a secret chamber, deep in the heart of the ship. The Lethe was masquerading as a general survey ship. Hardly anyone knew of its true purpose.

– And what of you, Operative Saskyll?

– I'm sorry. I don't understand the question.

– Did anyone know of your... true purpose?

– Only Jaslyn.

– Ahh, yes. Your... co-conspirator.

– He is my friend.

– Of course he is.

It is only when Zoe screams that the Doctor and Jamie realise something is wrong.

Zoe is furiously trying to free herself from the grasp of a slimy, green tentacle which has emerged from the nearby swamp.

The Doctor leaps to his feet and his soil-sampling device rolls away as it is forgotten.

– What happened to the LifePod, Operative Saskyll?

– The LifePod was abandoned.

– Abandoned?

– Thrown away, jettisoned. The whole dismal experiment brought to a premature end.

– I see. Because of your... moral disagreement with the Project?

– Because of my moral objection to the Project.

– One wonders how and why you were allowed to join such a project, if you felt so strongly about it.

– Jaslyn had contacts. We were able to fake our ident-passes, gain the confidence of the team. We had the necessary scientific knowledge. They just didn't know we'd be using that knowledge to sabotage the project, not to work for it.

– So it would appear. Your objections, then. Let us go through those.

– I did not like the assertions of superiority being made. The idea that all we had to do was filter out these... undesirable traits ill our genetic makeup and we would make some kind of projection of the perfect form of our race. I objected to that.

– The waste was... chemically filtered?

– A euphemism.

– I beg your pardon?

– The waste was... mixed with chemicals to make it inert, and disposed of in giant vats which were supposed to be ejected into deep space. As far as possible from the nearest habitable planet.

– And the waste consisted of…?

– All the mutations, the failed evolutions, the extras that the gene-

pool of our race could supposedly do without.

– Tell me what you did, Operative Saskyll. – ...hhhh...

– I did not hear you, Operative Saskyll.

– I know. I was... formulating my answer.

Zoe, kneeling in the mud, rubs the red mark on her neck as a concerned Doctor and Jamie rush to her aid. With a deep, organic slurping noise, the tentacle has retreated back into the swamp. The mud and the fog both close up behind it, as if mending themselves.

The Doctor pats her on the shoulder. 'There, there, my dear. It was... probably only being friendly...'

Zoe, frowning, shakes her head. She holds her palms out in front of her, staring at them as if trying to remember something. 'It didn't intend to harm me....' She stares back into the swamp. 'Almost as if it sensed we were no threat to it.'

'Well...' Jamie narrows his eyes and stares into the fog. 'Yon beastie seems tae have gone now. Doctor, is it ma eyes or is this fog getting thicker?'

'Do you know, Jamie, I think you could be right!' The Doctor straightens up, stretches his arms above his head and gives a broad grin. 'Never mind,' he says, 'I've satisfied my curiosity.'

Zoe looks up, her expression concerned. 'Doctor — your soil-sampler. I'm so sorry, I think we lost it...'

The Doctor waves something in her face — a small, battered metal box with a digital screen on it. 'Don't worry, Zoe,' he murmurs. 'I saved enough to analyse.'

– Well, Operative Saskyll? I am waiting.

– Yes... I know.

– There is no need for this emotion, Operative.

– I'm sorry. just that I find the whole thing very... upsetting.

– Oh, dear me. Operative Saskyll, the purpose of this interview is simply to determine whether your actions warrant a punishment... Please do not cry.

– We... released it.

– You released the LifePod? I am confused. I thought you said you destroyed the LifePod?

– Not the LifePod. The... other.

– The... other?

– The waste. We released the waste.

– All the genetic abnormalities of our race?

– It had life! It was developing...

– Yes, Operative?

– It was developing sentience.

– I see.

– You don't really, do you?

– Well... It is not for me to say. Please wait here. I shall see that you are brought something to eat and drink.

– What will happen then?

– Your fate will be decided when the tribunal has had dine to assess the information.

The Interrogator, exhausted, is glad to get home after his day's work.

Of all the interviews he has had to carry out today, that with the renegade Saskyll has been the most unsettling. As he mixes the drink which his drone-servant brings to him, he thinks about the light in the woman's eyes, and her total conviction that she has done the right thing.

Outside the city-dome, the night sky is glowing, as usual. The planet is burning up as they watch, rainbows of death painting the sky in ultracoloured hues as the atmosphere disintegrates, dissolves.

The Interrogator sips his drink and wonders if their race will survive.

It has sensed... word. Mind. Keen mind.

Sense of space, big open space and glittering stars. Sensed also... intelligence. Compassion?

Where these words come from? What mean?

Sinks deeper into mud. Grows. Evolves. Gets stronger. Somehow knows, as if looking down on self; that years will go by, millennia even. Knows it lives and should not.

Knows it was rejected.

That which lives should have died.

That which died should have lived.

Wait millennia. Maybe good. Maybe... even better.

For now, just darkness. Warm water, darkness and the mud, the fog. Reach out, embrace. Watch the skies. More will come.

Will be ready to welcome them?

The fog is mustard-yellow and thick, shrouding a spiky, twisted landscape. Thorny plants and bulbous trees fight for space on the mud, hiding most of the feeble light, while scarlet fronds brush the bubbling marshes. The fog is like a living thing as it snakes through the forest, frothing and coiling around the dying vegetation. In the velvet sky, a milky splash of constellations hints at other worlds. This is not a place which acknowledges their existence.

And then a light shines...

Missing Pieces

JONATHAN BLUM

"I'm just a bookend, holding up one end of the universe. And I can't see what's happening at the other end of the shelf. "
-- The Seventh Doctor, "Time's Crucible"

They'd finished building the wall, and one by one they shuffled inside through the remaining door. The last one through was the tweedy little Scottish man, who stood on the threshold and looked back at the one they were leaving outside.

'You never would listen, would you,' he murmured.

The last man outside was sitting in tatters, his face staring blankly, inward. He'd crumpled into this heap and hadn't moved.

'No, you had to do it your way,' the little man went on. He turned back and started to pace over the other man, his umbrella ticking against the stones, marking time. 'You knew what would come of not being responsible. And still you went dancing on ahead regardless.

'And do you know what the worst of it was? You were absolutely right.'

He stopped, kneeled, lowering himself to try to meet the other man's eyes. 'You were right. To put Life, any life, over the dictates of Time and reason and sense itself. You did what we'd always wanted to do. Instead of worrying about the fall of every butterfly, you were a butterfly. And you flourished.'

He reached out and touched the younger man's cheek, gently turning his head, trying to bring those eyes to his. But even when that fixed gaze aimed right at him, he could tell he wasn't seeing him.

'You never deserved to face this. You with your love of life, to be faced with a choice where there was no choice, where either way both Time and life would be lost on such a scale...' The little man had to look away for a moment. The eyes he was addressing said they knew that better than he did.

'And faced with that choice, you took it. You looked yourself in the

eye, pulled a lever, ended life. Saved it all, at the cost of so much.' He rallied, looked up, looked the young man who followed him in the eye.

Gently, he held the younger man's face in both his hands, bestowing the only blessing he could give. 'I wouldn't have had that strength. I wouldn't have dared to upset Time like that. I'd have kept looking for another option till there weren't any more, and it was all too late. You did so much, and you're suffering so much for it.

'And that's why we're taking your pain away.'

The young man finally reacted. His eyes moved a fraction, taking in the wall, to the still-open door. His face looked old-young now, the eyes flat and hard, the crows feet creeping in around the corners.

'You know why we're doing this,' the older man said gently, as reassuring as he could manage it. 'It was your idea, our idea, though of course you can't remember now. You saw the reason in those final moments, with the face of the Grandfather staring into yours as you pulled the lever. Your own face, your own future, even as you took the action you first thought would prevent it.

'You realized then, of course you knew that trick. "No, don't pull that lever, you're making a terrible mistake..." I suppose you had learned something from me after all.

'And then it fell into place. Was it really so hard to imagine, that old Grandfather Paradox's ultimate paradox was to create himself? That he was a future of yours which never would have been, had he not wormed his way into our conceptual space? That he only ever gathered all his children in Faction Paradox, guided them in his ways, built their whole eleven-day empire, only so that in the end you would be forced to destroy them like that? And thus, by making you look into the abyss of Paradox... convincing you to destroy the future based on what you knew of it... he'd led you to think like him.

'The first paradox is always the hardest -- so he made it easy on you. The horror you were stopping was on such a grand scale, he'd broken down the linear world you knew into an incoherent mass of carnage and contradictions... Better to sweep it all away. Start afresh.

'But he'd opened your eyes to the meaninglessness of Time. He'd forced you into an act which no one could commit and stay entirely sane. And by destroying the future you thought he wanted, you would

ensure that he *was* your future.'

Those eyes were looking past him, past the wall. The little man turned, looked for a moment at the other men still visible through the door. Looked at the gaunt smocked figure they were surrounding, holding, soothing and pinioning, hands gently running across his feverish brow. Those same eyes between the same crows-feet staring back from under harsh cropped hair. Clutching his shoulder, nails tearing into his own upper arm, muttering *I've seen the face of god and it's hollow...*

'It's a good thing you spotted his game, and decided not to play.' Creakingly the little man stood. 'Good thing you recognized that the only way not to go mad, was to go out of your head.'

He ambled back to the door, drew it shut, casually hiding the other figures behind it. 'We'll take care of him,' he went on. 'We might even be able to heal him, one day. If you find a way to help him deal with it all, we'll be listening.' He gave a contemplative shake of his head. 'Gods know, we could use all the help we can get.'

He turned to the door, but let his hand fall from the knob. He couldn't leave it like that. What do you say at such a parting?

So he stretched on a smile. 'Still, we'll look after him. You. Me. Us. Whoever. Just think of all the pronoun trouble you won't have now.'

Not a flicker.

'And don't you worry about us. I'd been expecting a worse afterlife, to be honest. Still, I'll miss our games of cards -- I'd been hoping that one of these days I'd get you to play by the same rules twice. At least I've still got those endless games of darts with the loud one to pass the time.'

The face was a rock.

He stood there for a moment longer, at a loss. Finally he took a step back, let his shoulders slump, no longer supporting the weight of a pretence.

'You've never listened to me, and you never should have. You're older and wiser than me, young man. Now more than ever.' Quietly he let out a shaky breath. 'Older than I've ever been, and still the youngest of us all... But listen to me now, when I tell you not to forget that.

You've learned things that I never knew.

'I was haunted by what I thought were missing pieces of me; you didn't let yourself be burdened by them. Now you too will be haunted by half-memories of some *other* life, one you know is sleeping in your mind somewhere. But don't let us weigh on you like that. You don't want to have all the missing pieces -- once the puzzle is complete it's *over*, and the whole point is to keep playing forever.

'That very sense of freedom which the Grandfather tried to use as a weakness, is your source of strength. You're not afraid to live without your past. All this time you've had an urge to be free of it, from that exhilarating first day after you woke up not knowing who you were... You have that now. Enjoy it.'

Out of words, he looked for just a moment longer, then shuffled back towards the door. For a moment he felt the urge to twirl his umbrella as he left, but it seemed futile in the face of it.

The words came quietly from behind him.

'Thank you.'

He froze for a moment, not daring to let his face move. 'The pleasure's all ours,' he managed, and fumbled for the key.

He stepped across the threshold and drew the door shut behind him, letting it seal itself into the wall. His final blessing hung there long after he'd gone.

'Go now. Fly.'

Time Out

DAVID A. McINTEE

'I'm dead,' the Doctor said, matter-of-factly, 'and it's not a very enviable position.'

The little songbird remained silent, in its wooden cage on the bench beside him.

Across the street, a hawker was selling the birds, their cages decorating an old tree; particularly surreal Christmas decorations. A few of the songbirds were sitting in the tree uncaged. The hawker's assistant was stalking them slowly, more like a cartoon hunter than a cat. Then: whump; the fall of the net, and a bird was efficiently scooped up, and transferred into a little cage. In a moment, the cage was swinging gently in the breeze, back on its mother tree.

The Doctor fed little nuts to his songbird. 'You don't mind being fed by a dead man, do you? Actually, a dead man several times over... Sometimes more than others.' His tweed clothes were clean enough, but there were still traces of grave earth under his fingernails.

The child he had just had buried on Lantau Island had died only a few hours ago, four hundred years in the past. The old Taoist sifu on the island had known the Doctor long enough not to ask questions that could never have believable answers.

The grave earth wasn't the child's, of course. It was his own. 'Death and rebirth,' he said to the bird. 'It's an interesting cycle; you really should try it. But you can't, can you? It's not exactly something you can choose, or have chosen for you. It just happens if that's who you are.'

The Doctor opened the wooden cage happily, gently wooing the songbird out. 'There, the next best thing.' It sang as it emerged; took to the air on the sweetest of notes. The Doctor watched it for a moment, with an expression that suggested he enjoyed the bird's freedom almost as much as it did.

He stood, tipping his hat to his feathered friend. When he walked away, he had a little more bounce in his step than he had when he

arrived.

Soon after he was gone, the bird settled onto a nice little branch on the tree of cages. Soon it would be fed, and sheltered, until the next person who wished to trade for a moment of song and freedom. That's what happened every time the Doctor visited the little hawker. Sometimes he just needed to remind himself of it.

Dinner Conversation

Charles Daniels

Inside the TARDIS, two strange beings from the planet Gallifrey performed the ancient rituals of setting up for dinner.

'I picked up these porcelain plates from Marco Polo himself you know?' the Doctor mentioned causally as he set down two of them on a small table.

'Who?' asked the young, blonde Romana.

'Marco Polo, an explorer of ancient earth.'

'Oh! You mean the first human to reach Alpha Proxima!' replied the young woman cheerfully as she rattled through an endless drawer of what was meant to be silverware.

'No, that was Marcus Pullman. Marco Polo explored Cafe. He was an Italian fellow. If you recall Marcus Pullman was born in Bovey Tracy, which is quite different I'm afraid.'

'Italy, Bovey Tracy, what's the difference? Only a few thousand miles.'

Romana clucked with annoyance, still sorting through items that looked more like medieval torture devices than anything anyone could properly eat tea with.

'Well, on the cosmic scale of course, but you'd be amazed what it means on the earth. A few hundred miles on the earth and accents change, national identities, political philosophies, acceptable footwear standards... it all goes into chaos.'

'How frustrating!' Romana finally spat out in aghast irritation

'Oh I know! Once I had the misfortune to land on the earth when they were undergoing a terrible little bit of childishness, The Cola Wars I believe it was called.'

'I think I'm going mad!'

'Yes, I meant how could one choose? One carbonated beverage tastes much the same as any other, according to my taste buds at any rate.'

'No Doctor! I mean about your silverware drawer!' Romana shrieked in frustration as a mechanical crab snapped at her fingers.

'Oh, that's an Altapioon Feeding Crab. You aren't supposed to touch it or it will mistake you for the main course. You just let it snatch up the food and bring it to you.'

'It looks quite ornate. Is it for special occasions?'

'No the Altapioon are just notoriously lazy. They can't be bothered with knives and forks, or spoons and chopsticks for that matter.'

'Well what am I meant to be looking for?' Romana looked up at the Doctor pleadingly. This entire experience was proving most distasteful. When he'd suggested they'd sit down for a quiet dinner she expected some good conversation and a light atmosphere, not some form of barbaric dissection.

'Ideally we are looking for four wooden or ceramic sticks, or a complete set of silverware. The first item of that to look for would be a long metal piece which forks into three or four separate lengths.'

'What's that meant to be?'

'A fork.'

'And what do we do with it?'

'Stab things.'

Romana got an uncomfortable quiver in her stomach. 'This meal, will be dead already, won't it?'

'Oh yes! And fully cooked! The stabbing is just a way to get it to our mouths you see.'

Romana breathed a sigh of relief and within moments found two of the objects as the Doctor had described.

'Excellent! Now we'll need a spoon for scooping and a knife for cutting. One is just a flat piece of metal with a sharp edge and the other just a scoop. Think you can handle it?'

'I think I'll manage. Thanks for the help. Do you think this is entirely necessary though?'

The Doctor had already begun to head toward the makeshift kitchen but he turned back to reply. 'Oh yes! Terribly. We can't eat without the proper utensils. It wouldn't be becoming, not for our clothes at least.'

Turning back away he continued quickly toward the part of the TARDIS that was now filthy with spices, powders, and discarded

wrappings. The Doctor had quite a few mishaps in the process of preparing the meal and the state of the floors, walls, and indeed the entire surrounding area made this point abundantly clear.

'What are you making in there?' Romana asked as her eyes had begun to water from the strange thick scent and vapour in the air.

'A recipe from India. Tonight we feast on Chicken Vindaloo!' The Doctor smiled with a crazed face. 'At least I hope so, I've never cooked it before actually. I did make two minor errors, but it will be of no difference I'm sure.'

Romana was calmly placing the silverware next to the fine plates on the table now as she listened to the Doctor. 'What errors might those be?'

'Well, actually more like one error and one lapse of judgement. You see the first was the recipe called for teaspoons, and I've use Altarian Tablespoons, which are quite a bit larger than human Tablespoons. So I've added rather too much chilli powder I'm afraid.'

'Will that affect the taste?'

'It might be a bit hot for Vindaloo. Still, I'm not an expert at these things. Maybe I'll just make some more naan bread and give a mild counterpart taste.'

'And the lapse of judgement?'

'Oh, well. You see I couldn't find a stove. So I decided to use the gravational stabiliser as a heat source. It's worked mostly but of course as I move the pan the space distorts over time-space so some parts have cooked faster than others, you see?'

'WAIT! You're cooking food on our gravational stabiliser?!' Romana was deeply disturbed by this idea.

'It was the only adequate heat source,' the Doctor said in his defence.

'Didn't it explode?' Romana imagined that the warping of the fabric of the stabiliser might cause minor disruptions, and any curry sauce that might flow into the component wouldn't do much help either.

'A few minor explosions, but that's a good way to build up the proper heat!' The Doctor thought this was rather clever actually.

Romana sighed in worry, knowing that if the gravational stabiliser did in fact critically malfunction it would be her gruesome duty to wade

through a splatter of curry sauce and eccentric Time Lord to fix it.

'Rice!' the Doctor proclaimed, apparently not worrying about the rather not too slight possibility that his atoms could be forever meshed with the items surrounding him if he were to accidentally spill even the slightest more sauce from the pan. Instead the Doctor hurriedly ran to the table where Romana was already sitting to put some freshly cooked rice onto the plates.

'Rice?' asked Romana as she looked down at the food for the first time.

'The white seeds of aquatic grass,' explained the Doctor matter of factly.

'Sounds very... appetizing,' Romana lied, somewhat badly but with a smile that made the Doctor smile back in kind.

The Doctor zipped back into the kitchen like a mad man. Pouring the contents of the saucepan into a fancy serving bowl shaped like a white kitten. The sauce flowed easily into the bowl and once inside the Doctor set aside the pan casually on the gravational stabiliser which let out a large, but thankfully nonlethal explosion. Unphased entirely the Doctor approached the table again with a large Altarian Spoon and the kitten bowl with curry sauce inside.

'Dinner is served!' the Doctor said with excitement as he spooned on some of the curry sauce and chicken onto the plate for Romana. Then setting the kitten in the middle of the table and sitting down to serve himself. He looked hopefully at his companion, awaiting her reaction as much as to make sure it was safe.

Romana took the first anxious bite. The flavour was definitely a strong presence. So strong in fact it seemed to poke hot needles in all directions of her mouth and her eyes watered visibly. 'Quite spicy!' she commented.

The Doctor smiled and took a bite himself. 'Oh yes!' he remarked as he noticed that the dish was beginning to clear his sinuses.

Romana took another politely minuscule bite of the dish. The sauce was so intense she thought she could taste it as it still lay on the table.

The Doctor was however absolutely sure he could taste it from the next room away. For the second time that evening inspiration struck him. 'I say, this is nice, but I know this really wonderful curry house

called The Star of India on the planet Bethselaman. What if we sampled them instead, just for comparison?'

'Alright. Good idea,' replied Romana through the cloth she was using to wipe the tears from her face.

'They make a great Korma.'

Of Chocolates And Queens

KATHRYN SULLIVAN

Doctor Evelyn Smythe emerged from the TARDIS to confront a white-dusted landscape. 'Still not Mexico,' she called back through the door.

'Are you sure?' came the reply.

A reasonable question, Evelyn decided. Just because she had been expecting sunshine and palm trees was no reason to think that all of Mexico was like that. 'No. How much snow does Mexico usually get?' She studied the snow-covered hills in the distance as she walked further into the clearing, the thin layer of snow crunching under her shoes. It had to be an unseasonably late snow; the trees all had green leaves. She looked closer. They definitely weren't firs, but none of the leaf shapes looked familiar.

She glanced at the sky. Was that blue a bit green? 'I don't think we're on Earth.'

'Nonsense. I set the coordinates very carefully.' The Doctor appeared in the doorway, his eager expression falling as he looked about their landing site. 'Perhaps the mountains? The snow isn't very deep.'

Evelyn gestured at the distant hills. 'If you call those "mountains", your eyes are worse than mine.'

'Yes... well, the TARDIS did register a slight flutter before we landed, perhaps that's what threw us off.' He disappeared back into the interior. 'Back in a mo.'

Evelyn tugged her orange cardigan closer about her. She was warm enough with it on, and the light dusting looked as if it would melt during the day. There seemed to be a faint path under the snow, and wherever it led to had to be more interesting than watching the Doctor putter around with the console for hours. 'A bit of a ramble, then?' she asked herself. 'Why not?'

She walked back to the TARDIS and peered inside the open door. Sure enough, several panels were already off the console and on the

floor, and she didn't see the Doctor anywhere. 'I'm just going to follow the path a bit,' she called.

A hand surfaced from behind the console and waved at her.

Evelyn smiled. 'Good luck with the "flutter".'

She crunched her way through the snow and looked both ways along the path. To the right it went into the forest. To the left was more forest.

Birdsong off to her right decided her. She followed the chorus of trills and warbles deeper into the woods until the hidden songsters disbanded with a rustle of leaves.

Evelyn continued on. The trees thinned out, giving her a clear view of the bluish-green sky and the pale disk of the moon overhead. She then saw a second moon next to the first, and harrumphed. 'Mexico!'

Past the trees was a field filled with large animals that reminded her vaguely of llamas - or was it alpacas? - with long necks and long pointed ears and dappled blue and cream fur. Snow on their backs fell off as they scraped away the melting white crust on the ground with muzzles or feet to graze. She smelled wet wool as she approached the closest ones. They lifted their heads to gaze at her with soft brown eyes.

'My, what lovely long eyelashes you have,' she greeted them. She was taken aback when a voice responded, 'You're Odwinan!'

'No, I'm....' Evelyn blinked, realising that none of the nearby llamas' lips had moved. The voice seemed to have come from the midst of a cluster of blue and cream. '...from Earth.'

'Earth?! Then it is better than I had hoped!'

The 'llamas' moved aside as Evelyn approached the group, revealing a kneeling figure muffled in an oversized cream coat, working on a small llamas' leg. The voice sounded female, although the greyish tan hair was short, in what the Americans called a 'buzz cut'. Sunlight glinted off a circlet about her head as she looked up and smiled at Evelyn, then turned her attention again to the leg she was wrapping in a bright blue bandage. 'Has the blockade ended, then? Are ships once again landing at the 'port?'

'I wouldn't know. We landed...somewhere else.' One 'llama' grunted at Evelyn and shoved itself forward, blocking her way. 'Is it badly hurt?'

Evelyn asked, trying to look around the blue and cream bulk.

'Stepped in a chomper hole. No herders to patrol the pasture against native vermin.' The young woman sighed and tied off the bandage. 'With the raids, so many are now on defence of the holdings that the apfs are left to fend for themselves.'

'Native?' Evelyn asked. 'Then this isn't your planet?'

'Well, *I* was born here, as were my parents and grandparents. The original colonists came from Mirsenny. The apfs were native to another planet Mirsenny colonised.' She set the small apf back on its feet. It shook itself then scampered lopsidedly to the adult blocking Evelyn. The larger apf sniffed it all over once, snorted at the bandage, then raised its head and grunted at Evelyn. It moved sedately away, the little one limping behind.

'You do good work,' Evelyn commented.

'I specialised in veterinary science when I went to university on Odwin.' She began returning bandages and scissors to her kit, stopping now and again to stroke inquisitive apf noses.

'Odwin?' asked Evelyn, remembering the name from before.

'An Earth colony. You must have passed the planet on your way here.'

'We...took an unusual route.' Evelyn decided to change that subject. 'I'm Evelyn Smythe.'

'Daiseppe, but my friends on Odwin shortened that to Daisy. Welcome.'

'We're on Fapheny, a Mirsenn colony planet,' the Doctor reported as he emerged from the TARDIS. 'You'll like this better than Mexico, Evelyn; they...' He looked about the empty clearing. 'Evelyn? Ah, the path!'

The snow had melted, leaving no indication of which way Evelyn had gone. He looked both ways along the path, pointed right, and turned left.

Daiseppe slung her kit's carrystrap over her shoulder. 'Which way, then?'

Evelyn stared in fascination at Daiseppe's turquoise eyes. The irises were large with no visible cornea, and gold ringed both the pupil

and the outer rim. 'Which way where?'

'To your ship. If your communications equipment still works we could get a message out to Mirsenny requesting help. And you'll need to warn your friend about the raiders - a ship would be a prime target for them to hit. They destroyed all of ours.'

Evelyn wasn't sure if the Doctor had any communication equipment in the TARDIS. However, she was quite sure he wouldn't like raiders attacking the TARDIS. 'Back along this path.'

The path led to a large manor house with numerous outbuildings clustered about it. 'Like ducklings about their mother,' the Doctor decided. He strode down the path and entered the bustling courtyard, looking about for Evelyn. The colonists were humanoid, but their short stubble of hair and skin tones ranging from gold to brass were only two of many differences from an Earth human. Evelyn would be easy to spot.

He forgot that the same would apply to himself. A tan-haired Faphen carrying a loaded sack stopped to stare, and the Doctor nodded to him. 'Pleasant day, isn't it?'

'Aye,' the Faphen replied bemusedly. Beyond him, two more turned to look. One set off on a run towards one of the outer buildings.

The Doctor felt a tug on his coat and turned to see two small children studying him, their turquoise eyes wide with awe. 'Are the raiders gone?' one asked.

'Raiders?'

'With that festival garb,' a haughty voice drawled, 'the blockade must surely be over.'

A tall Faphen in a broad-brimmed black hat and long black cloak leaned against a nearby wall. The Doctor opened his mouth to reply when he felt a tug on his coat again. 'I like it,' the second child whispered.

'Well said, young Tolinn!' A tan-and-white-haired female emerged from the gathering crowd. She trotted briskly up to them, wiping her hands on her plain apron. 'Despite fashion dictates on Mirsenny,' she swept the cloaked male a withering glance, then turned to smile at the Doctor, 'we on Fapheny wear what we please. You are most welcome

to Mazeppe House. I am Eistr, Family Head. How may we help you?'

'Aren't you afraid of these raiders?' Evelyn asked as they walked through the forest. 'What do they want?'

'We don't know. They just attack our holdings and fly off again. It's been two moons' cycles and there's been no demands, no threats," Daiseppe shook her head. 'A week ago, one of my oldest and dearest friends was killed in a raid. Ever since, in a way, I've been daring them to come after me. I guess I thought that then maybe they'd leave my people alone.'

'Your people?' Evelyn glanced at the metal band across Daiseppe 's forehead and made the obvious guess. 'You're the...'

'Queen. Yes.'

'But we should combine forces, Doctor! You are looking for your friend, and I seek our queen.'

'Byllesby,' Eistr said in a long-suffering tone, 'you were the promised of the queen's late sister. If Daiseppe did not tell you where she went how could I hope to know?'

Byllesby swept his hat from his dark hair and bowed elegantly toward Eistr as the Family Head scowled. 'She told no one at Court. Honoured Lady. She simply slipped away. I've heard rumours of her visits at several holdings and thought to find her here, at her Family's ancestral holding, but...'

Eistr remained silent.

He appealed to the Doctor. 'You must be fearful that the raiders have found your friend. I have swift transport; we could scour a wide area before Mazeppe House could organise a search.'

The Doctor had the impression that Eistr had information she wasn't telling Byllesby. 'Evelyn hasn't been missing very long. I'm sure she'll find her way here, once she sees I'm not at-'

A clanging began from the upper levels of the buildings. 'Raiders approaching! Make ready!'

Daiseppe cut another branch with the surgical laser and inserted it into the netting. 'That's as safe as we can make it for now. Your sure no one can break in?'

'Only the Doctor has the key.' Evelyn studied the camouflaged TARDIS. Draped in capture netting from the vet kit and leafy branches, the TARDIS could pass for a very odd blue and green tree - as long as the observer was flying overhead at a high rate of speed. And extremely near-sighted. Or drunk. 'This isn't going to fool anyone for long.'

'I'll ask Mazeppe House to move it into safekeeping. They're close by. Your friend is probably there already.'

The Docter watched as children and livestock were hurried under cover. Grim-faced colonists closed the gates while others distributed ancient-looking blasters. Explosions sounded close against the outer walls, and the Doctor scanned the sky for the attackers.

Byllesby directed his attention lower. 'Any ship would be shot out of the sky by the defence cannons. They ride skimmers in from outside cannon range and under our detectors.' He drew a slim blaster and watched the rooftops.

Pieces of wood and stone flew skyward as another explosion struck the outer walls.

'They've cleared the forest,' a silver-haired Faphen announced from his post by the gate. He pointed at a group standing by the large double doors of a stable. 'Now!'

They rushed to open the doors. Out of the building flew aisled with red-and-blue uniformed Faphens. The three-person sleds lifted up over the buildings and out to repel the raiders.

'The Royal Guards!' Byllesby pushed his way through the excited group of defenders toward Eistr, who was watching through the gate alongside the silver-haired Faphen. 'You said you hadn't seen her.'

'We haven't.' Eistr gestured at her neighbour. 'You probably don't recognise Wingleader Jennar out of uniform. *They* arrived a while ago. Talk to *them* about the queen's whereabouts.'

Alerted by the sound of explosions, Evelyn and Daiseppe reached the edge of the forest in time to see the small skimmers wheel and fly away, hotly pursued by the larger airsleds.

'Yes!' Daiseppe crowed. 'I *told* Jennar he'd do better to wait at the House!' She watched the pursuit anxiously. 'Don't lose them in the

trees...'

'Those are the raiders?' Evelyn asked, shading her eyes as she watched the fleeing specks. 'A group of hooligans on flying scooters?'

'They look to be from several different planets,' Daiseppe observed. 'Mercenaries, then, as Gafron thought. Seems to be only a small raiding party this time. *Get* them!'

'There you are!' A young uniformed Fahen with short auburn hair ran up to them. She paused to catch her breath, her purple eyes widening as she stared at Evelyn.

Daiseppe performed the introductions. 'Raien, this is Evelyn Smythe. Evelyn, this is Raien of House Mennte, the Royal Guards. Has Jennar forgiven me yet for escaping from Court?'

Raien gave a short laugh. 'Gafron would have had him on pasture patrol for moons for losing you. What do you think?'

Daiseppe grinned twistedly. 'Probably not. Ah well, he tracked me down at last. But I'm not going back yet.'

'Majesty,' the guard began, then wearily sighed. 'Daisy. You promised. You're no longer safe out here. After all, we found you and so, it appears, did they.' She nodded towards the forest edge where the skimmers had vanished. She frowned and added, 'And so did Byllesby.'

Daiseppe made a face. 'Not him too.'

'Byllesby?' Evelyn inquired.

'My sister's Promised. Arrogant, condescending - I don't know what she saw in him but I wish he'd go back to Homeworld. He had plenty of time before the blockade started,' she muttered. Raien's lips twitched, but she remained silent.

Daiseppe sighed. 'Oh, all right. If he's there, then I'll go back to Court. It's easier to avoid him there. Could you have my greetings relayed to Eistr? And we need to have Evelyn's ship moved undercover.'

'And let the Doctor know where I've gone,' Evelyn added, 'if anyone sees him.'

'Doctor, you must return with me to Court!' Byllesby said. 'The mere sight of you will show that the blockade can be broken!'

'Must I? I'd rather not. My friend will be looking for me, and I'm sure she's still out there-'

'With the rest of your raider friends, no doubt,' Wingleader Jennar interrupted.

'Jennar, are you sure?' Eistr said worriedly. 'I'm inclined to believe that the Doctor knows nothing of them.'

'And yet he managed to slip through their blockade? And arrives here just before the raiders? A little too coincidental, I'd say.'

'And would you say that this,' the Doctor flung out his arms, 'is the attire of a raider? Or a spy? I'd expect either of those to wear clothing like yours, Jennar. Or perhaps a long black cape would be better to skulk in. Oh, sorry, Byllesby.'

'Come now, Jennar,' Byllesby argued, glancing askance at the Doctor. 'Next you'll be saying that there's something suspicious in *my* arrival here.'

'Now that you mention it, sir,' Jennar turned to regard the dark-haired Promised, 'I do. This makes the third time.'

'Ah, I see. Advisor Gafron's spirit lives on. Can't you accept that I just have incredibly bad luck?'

The Doctor looked from Jennar to Byllesby, then appealed to Eistr. 'I gather there's an explanation but I just arrived here. The third time? Bad luck?'

Eistr crossed her arms. 'I've heard only rumours myself.'

Byllesby sighed expansively. 'A year ago I was travelling with the king's party - the present queen's parents - and stopped off to visit my beloved on Homeworld. Not long after, the ship exploded, killing everyone aboard.' He glared at the Wingleader. 'I'm sure Jennar and his former leader would have been happier if I had stayed aboard.'

Jennar's expression betrayed nothing. 'Advisor Gafron appreciated your support of Queen Isdare and her sister during their mourning.'

The Doctor waited, but Jennar and Byllesby seemed to have gone back to glaring at each other. 'And the second time?'

Byllesby straightened his cloak. 'As the Wingleader mentioned, my beloved became Queen. But, six moons cycles ago, only two days before our Joining Ceremony, she...died.' He closed his eyes and took

a shuddering breath. 'I...found her.'

'Really?' The Doctor looked at Eistr and Jennar and saw that they were waiting for Byllesby. 'How very... unfortunate for you. How did she die?'

Byllesby sighed. 'I found her at the foot of the stairs. She must have fallen...'

'Her skull was crushed.' Jennar added. Eistr put a hand to her mouth and closed her eyes.

'And so I became Queen,' Daiseppe finished. She spread her hands helplessly. 'I've no training for this. Isdare was the Heir. She learned protocol, sat through all the boring ceremonies - even went to Homeworld for a year. I was free to choose my own path, so I decided to be a veterinarian. And now, look at me.' She crossed her arms and flung herself back against the airsled's cushions. 'This is not what I planned for this point of my life. And I used to think school was difficult.'

Evelyn nodded toward the guard at the controls. 'You all went to school together?'

'Of course. Both here and on Odwin. "One must be ready for whatever life may offer. Education is of value to all." Not all the Houses feel that way, but mine remembers where they came from.' That was said with a mocking smile, and Evelyn had the feeling that phrase had been said to the Queen before in a much different manner.

'Well, I agree,' Evelyn said firmly. 'Education *is* important. I'm a university professor myself.'

Daiseppe grinned. 'I thought there was a reason why I felt comfortable talking to you. You wouldn't happen to specialise in politics, would you? Any insight would be appreciated.'

'Your father knew the best way to deal with the gossips at Court,' Raien said over her shoulder. 'And so do you.'

'It was easy enough for him to ignore them - I can't afford that luxury, not when I need everyone's cooperation to deal with the

raiders.' Daiseppe hunched further into the cushions.

'If insight is needed,' Evelyn offered, 'let me tell you about one of my rulers. We called her "good Queen Bess".'

The Doctor leaned back against the cushions of the airsled and watched the countryside go by. Thanks to the timely arrival of a guard with the queen's and Evelyn's messages, he was travelling in a much more comfortable manner than Wingleader Jennar would have preferred. He smiled at the guard seated beside him. 'So, what's your queen like?'

The guard eyed Jennar in the pilot's seat before them, shook his head and muttered something under his breath that the Doctor didn't catch. He was older than Jennar or Byllesby, and the Doctor had the impression that he regarded the two as squabbling children. The Doctor cupped his ear, and the guard raised his voice to be heard over the wind. 'She's more like her father than her sister was. She's bright, she listens, and she cares about our people - unlike some members of Court.'

'And yet she disappeared from Court.'

'We all mourn in our own way, sir. Some wear black,' he looked tellingly at Byllesby, who was weaving his sporty airsled in patterns in their wake as if to point out the slowness of the Guard sled, 'and some think upon a loss. She took the death of Advisor Gafron hard - we all did. Gafron was head of Mennte House before becoming advisor to the king. But instead of shutting herself away, she went out among the Houses. Fair drove us all frantic, but I know Gafron would have been proud of her. She's a planner, that one - took us over a week to find her. Probably the only reason we finally caught up to her was because she checked each holding's herd. And then what does she do but order us to watch Mazeppe House while she checked the herd there.'

'Alone,' the Doctor mused, 'well, until Evelyn ran into her.' He tapped Jennar's shoulder. 'So, what do these raiders want?'

'I was hoping *you* would know,' Jennar replied.

The guard sighed and muttered under his breath.

Evelyn looked excitedly about as the airsled circled over the Court.

Rather than a city or town such as she would recognise, the capitol seemed to be more a collection of ten very large manor houses arranged in a rectangular pattern about a large courtyard.

'The 'port's on the far side of Court,' Raien commented, noticing her interest. 'That way it's in range of the cannon.'

'Cannon?' Evelyn looked as Raien pointed at the top of the nearby mountain, but only saw that the peak looked more metallic than rock.

She turned her attention again to the people below, wondering if the newest fashion was the military style haircut. Everyone's hair seemed to be that short, from youngest to oldest, female or male. She was pleased to note that the clothing styles did include a cardigan-type wrap.

The courtyard looked like a giant jigsaw puzzle from above. There were ten large interlocking slabs of stone, each a different colour, extending from the front of each house. Some slabs were larger than others. 'Why ten slabs?' Evelyn asked.

'To represent the ten Founding Houses,' Raien answered. She smoothly swung the airsled about on its descent before one of the smaller buildings. Evelyn recognised the design of a circlet in the facade. 'There are more than ten Houses now, of course.'

'So the raiders fly in, blow things up and fly away again. And they've done this at twenty holdings so far?'

'And the spaceport,' Jennar added. 'That was the first thing they hit.'

'But why?' asked the Doctor. 'What's the point? To make you leave the planet? Then why destroy the ships? Are they taking anything? Food, people, equipment? Costly export items?'

'It's too early in the year to raid for food - the crops were just planeted,' the guard explained. 'If s almost shearing time, but the raiders have left the apfs alone.'

'So far,' Jennar argued. 'People have been killed; no one is missing. Nothing's been taken.'

'Nothing that we know about,' the guard added, 'unless they did at the holdings that were totally destroyed. We've lost two complete Houses.'

'Mercenaries,' Jennar said angrily.

'Mercenaries are hired,' the Doctor said. 'So we must think who may have hired them. And why.' He looked out at the wooded hillsides. 'You haven't colonised all of this planet yet, have you?'

'We've only been here a few generations,' the guard said. 'You're just seeing the tamed parts of Fapheny. The native wildlife outside the holdings is pretty vicious stuff.' He shuddered. 'There's a House in the tropics, but it will be some time before we're spread out completely across this continent.'

'So the raiders could be based on the other side of the planet.'

'Those skimmers aren't long-range craft,' Jennar pointed out.

'Then their base or ship can't be far from the holdings,' the Doctor said triumphantly.

'With our ships destroyed and the blockade around our planet, we have no way to scan for them on the surface,' Jennar countered.

'Gafron thought they might be landing in the Borderlands,' the guard mentioned. 'Our border patrols kept finding burned patches, but no ships and no raiders.'

'Until last week, when the patrol Gafron took out to the border was massacred.' Jennar hit the console with his fist. 'We're helpless to stop them.'

'Perhaps not,' the Doctor tapped his chin and stared dully at the sky. The faint disk of a moon was still visible above the horizon. 'Perhaps... Byllesby mentioned "detectors" along with a cannon.'

'Cannons,' Jennar corrected wearily. 'Each House has one near its main holding. They're all pointed into space. That's why the raiders use skimmers rather than landing in force.'

'Linear thinking, Wingleader. We just have to reflect on some other possibilities.'

'Are you sure you want to do this?' Raien argued as she brought the airsled in to hover over the courtyard.

No,' Daiseppe muttered. She smiled and waved as people gathered. 'I hate public speaking. But, as Evelyn said, it's the best way to counter gossip.'

The gathering grew into a crowd.

'It's the Queen!'

'Welcome back, Majesty!'

'How are the flocks?'

Evelyn looked in the direction of the mocking question and saw a haughty-looking young woman in a richly layered gown. Beside her was a much older woman, also expensively dressed, grasping an elegantly carved walking stick.

Good-natured laughter and smiles followed the question.

Daiseppe smiled as well. She raised her voice to answer. 'The flocks are well for now, but they, like the rest of us, would do better without the fear of attack. We've let that fear rule us, separate us from our strength. Now, we can either stay safe in our own Houses, or we can stand together and protect what is important to us. Therefore,' she took a deep breath, 'the spring festival, normally held in three days time, will go ahead unchanged. As in the past, it will be held in the courtyard, so that everyone may celebrate.'

The crowd cheered and Raien whispered hurriedly. 'You're ignoring Jennar's recommendation? He'll have lambs when he hears this.'

Daiseppe shrugged. 'Gafron didn't think the move to the Banquet Hall necessary. And if we restrict the celebration in that way the raiders win. We're not going to let them dictate our lives.'

She raised her voice. 'And,' Daiseppe waited for the noise to decrease and gestured for Evelyn to stand up, 'there will also be a special banquet to welcome Dr. Evelyn Smythe to Fapheny and to thank her for showing us that the blockade can be broken.'

'*Hundreds* of lambs,' Raien muttered.

Evelyn waved to the cheering crowd and noticed that the young woman was scowling.

She was still scowling when Evelyn and Raien encountered her in a corridor of the Residence, although she attempted to disguise it by a very pretty curtsy. 'So this is the queen's Odwinan friend?'

Raien was stiffly formal. 'Dr. Evelyn Smythe of Earth, Annett of House Laniun.'

'My, what a beautiful gown,' Evelyn admired. 'I don't think I've seen those fabrics before.'

Annett preened, lightly touching the gold dusting in her short brown

hair. 'Mother brought our House directly from Mirsenny. We still have contacts on Homeworld, so we have access to all the newest fashions.'

'I see.' Evelyn glanced aside at Raien, who was still imitating a statue. '"Brought"? Are you recent arrivals here?'

'I grew up here. But no, we aren't a Founding Family. Though, goodness knows, generations on a colony world do produce some startling changes in Families. There's a rumour that Daiseppe would rather be queen of the apfs.' She giggled. Two young women approaching them along the corridor joined in the laughter, then whispered to each other behind raised hands.

'Indeed,' Evelyn said coldly. She noticed another noblewoman looking disapprovingly at the gigglers and raised her voice to carry outside the group. 'I find it commendable that a ruler cared enough about her people to check on them personally. But perhaps things are done differently on Mirsenny.'

The distant noblewoman smiled and nodded toward Evelyn as the giggling stopped. Annett curtseyed, gathered her friends and swept away. Evelyn and Raien continued onwards. 'She's not going to forgive that,' Raien said softly.

Evelyn still had an instructor's ability to see behind her. She was quite aware that the three had stopped to confer. She smiled instead at the next group of nobles. 'What rank were those three?'

'Rank?' Raien sounded puzzled.

'Rank. Such as duchess, countess...' She stopped at Raien's uncomprehending expression. 'You don't have a class system of nobles?'

Raien shook her head. 'Class system? Mirsenny has royals, and those related to them, I think. But everyone you'll meet here is a House's representatives to Court."

'I see. So was that...display representative of how their Houses felt about the Queen?'

'I don't know. We thought...'

Raien opened her mouth, shut it, and then began grinning as Evelyn continued, 'And how do you convince a House that it would be better served by another representative?'

'We should have thought of this moons ago.' Raien quickened her

steps, steering Evelyn toward the woman who had smiled at them. Spiran will love the idea; let's talk to her first.'

'You interfered, didn't you?'

Evelyn looked up from admiring her gift shawl and saw the Doctor standing in the doorway of the small dining room. 'Hello, Doctor. Where have you been?'

He took a chair across the table from her. 'Looking at the detectors with Jennar and some boffin chap. We might be able to enhance the range - Never mind that! You interfered!'

'Have a chocolate, you're getting grumpy.' Evelyn pushed the plate toward him.

'What's that? A gift from another admirer?'

'The shawl? Yes, it's quite lovely. I do like apf wool; it's very light, and the colour...' She noticed the Doctor was pointing at the plate. 'Oh, that's fudge. From the cook. In thanks for some of my recipes. Did you know that they have chocolate here? It's very good.' She waited until he selected a piece. 'Daiseppe and I just...had a talk, that's all.'

'Ah,' the Doctor said.

'"The time has come,"the Walrus said,

"To talk of many things:

Of shoes-and ships-and sealing-wax-

Of cabbages-and kings-"

Only you talked of queens. Elizabeth?'

'And whom else should I have mentioned? Mary? Anne? Matilda never gained the throne. And, of course, she's a good example of what *not* to do right before you're crowned.'

The Doctor pushed the plate back. 'Have a chocolate.'

Evelyn did so. 'I like Daiseppe. She reminds me of some of my students"

'That, and she offered you chocolate.'

'Which only shows that she has excellent taste. But I liked her before that. She's an intelligent young woman who will be a thoughtful ruler.'

'If she isn't killed first.'

Evelyn glanced at him. 'You don't think those deaths were accidents

either, do you?'

He sighed. 'No, I don't. And the timing of the raiders' arrival is also no accident.'

Evelyn toyed thoughtfully with the shawl. 'If this was Earth, I'd be looking at who was next in line for the crown. I've met a few House representatives, but I haven't figured out how the rule passes down. It's not like Earth and I gather Fapheny doesn't follow Mirsenny standard rules of succession, either.'

'They're a young colony. Perhaps that's why these Houses formed a colony.'

'Perhaps. It seems that the Houses rotate rule - Daiseppe's grandfather wasn't a ruler, he wasn't even Head of a House, but her father became king somehow.'

The Doctor selected another chocolate. 'Jennar suspects Byllesby, but if he was trying to seize rule I would have thought he'd have waited until after the wedding. I don't kno why Jennar has it in for him.'

Evelyn chuckled. 'Oh, Doctor. It's obvious. Byllesby's the third son of royalty, already engaged once to a queen, and the present queen is very eligible.'

The Doctor blinked. 'Jennar's jealous?'

'According to Raien, *very* jealous.' She regarded the fudge plate. 'Whom else?'

'Whom else what?'

Evelyn started guiltily and turned to see Daiseppe in the doorway. 'Daiseppe. I don't think you've met my friend, the Doctor, yet.'

'No.' Daiseppe smiled warmly as she approached the table. 'Although I've heard a great deal about you. My thanks for all that you've done so far for my people, Doctor.'

'Delighted to be able to help, Majesty,' the Doctor said modestly. He glanced at her face. 'Is there something else we do?'

'Well,' Daiseppe glanced from one to the other, 'I came to ask Evelyn's advice, but yours would be most welcome, also. It's just that...'

'Yes?' the Doctor prompted.

'These raiders would never have dared threaten my father. But now,

with Gafron gone as well - he'd been adviser to my father as well as myself -- I don't know what to do. What can *I* do about this?'

'Same as your father,' Doctor responded. 'Did he lead your guards into battle?'

'No. That's Mennte House's responsibility.'

'And do they expect you to lead them against the raiders?'

'Me? With no military training? They'd be highly insulted and rightfully so.'

'So why do you think you shouldn't do the same as your father in this situation?'

'I...' Daiseppe started, then smiled. 'You're very wise Doctor.'

'Thank you. I try.'

Daiseppe left with a lighter step, and the Doctor looked smugly at Evelyn.

She raised an eyebrow. 'Now who's interfering?'

'Well, I...'

'Doctor?' Jennar appeared in the doorway. 'We're ready test the new signal.'

'I have to see a man about a detector,' the Doctor said firmly.

Evelyn smiled and waved. She folded the shawl. 'Interfering? I've only just started.'

'Byllesby,' Jennar said.

The Doctor started, and looked about the control room expecting to see the black-clad Mirsenn. The nearest technician shrugged and turned back to focusing the newly enhanced screen view of a blockading ship. The Doctor sighed. 'Jennar, don't think you're becoming a trifle fixated?'

'No, something you said, Doctor. We must think about why the mercenaries were hired. Byllesby is from Mirsenny, He has no immediate Family here on Fapheny. But he's a very distant relative of one of the Families that were killed.'

'More bad luck?' the Doctor suggested.

'Perhaps. The other Family killed was Aerdin House.'

The Doctor scratched the back of his neck. 'I admit I'm having problems keeping up with the relationships on your planet...'

'Fapheny had only two Houses who dealt in offworld transport. Aerdin House, whose ships brought the first colonists, ad now Laniun House.' Jennar held up his hand. 'Not to worry, Laniun House is small and still based in Court. They're protected from raider attacks.

'Now, the raiders attacked Mazeppe House after Byllesby arrived. I believe they were following *him*, not the Queen.'

The Doctor wheeled his chair over to the third of his projects. 'So who would have reason to destroy Aerdin House and a House that Byllesby is related to?'

Jennar sighed. 'I have no idea yet.'

'Well, once I finish this anti-jam frequency-shifter, you can contact Mirsenny and ask someone there.'

'Doctor,' the technician called. 'There must be something wrong with this detector.'

'Wrong? Wrong?' The Doctor wheeled back to the console and studied the controls. He turned one dial slightly and beamed at the picture. 'There's nothing wrong. This is a perfect view...' he peered closer, 'of a Mirsenn ship.'

'Camouflage!' Jennar exclaimed. 'Those conniving thieves! They must have stolen ships from Homeworld - no wonder they were able to attack us undetected!'

The Doctor looked from one screen to another. 'This is an awfully small blockade. I only count three ships.'

'A House Laniun ship reported at least ten ships blockading our world. But we haven't heard anything further since the raiders began jamming our offworld communications.'

The Doctor hmmed thoughtfully. 'The raiders could have reduced the amount - too many planets to rob, not enough ships. There might be only three out there right now.'

'So?' Jennar asked.

'Less for us to deal with. Unless you'd rather have seven more ships hiding behind the moons... or already landed in the Borderlands.'

The remaining days passed quickly with preparations for the festival. Evelyn enjoyed watching from the windows to see how the courtyard was transformed from an open place where people strolled to a small

fair, with brightly coloured tents and booths. A small corral was also beginning to fill with blue and cream apfs.

'That should do it,' the Doctor said triumphantly.

Jennar started awake. 'You've located the ships?'

'No, no, the anti-jam frequency shifter. I just turn this knob here and you'll be able to contact Mirsenny.' He turned the control, but before anyone had a chance to speak, a voice responded.

'Yes, I understand. It will be done.'

'Yeah, "Highness",' chimed in a second, rougher voice. 'But most of my people have left, remember? You said you didn't need them. There's enough here to create a good-sized attack, but I can't guarantee a hit on one person in a crowd, even if you put a big 'Kill me now' sign on her. We might hit you by accident, like.'

There was a pause, and the Doctor said hurriedly, 'I must we've found the frequency for one of the raider ships.'

Jennar looked exasperated, but before he could speak the raider continued, 'You'll have to have your own agents do the killinh - my people are too recognisable to get close. We'll fly over, blast what we can and you do the rest.'

There was silence as the communication ceased. Then the Doctor stood up. 'Could we go see the wreckage at the spaceport?'

'What are you doing?' Daiseppe asked.

Evelyn removed the bowl from the mixer, picked up a spoon, began her ritual hand-stirring-in of the special ingredient. 'I'd promised the Doctor a cake sometime and Frabel keeps a most wonderful kitchen.'

Across the room, the head cook looked up and beamed at the praise, then went back to his own preparations for the banquet.

Evelyn continued, 'I've found that if I keep my hands occupied - knitting, baking - my mind is freed to think of other things. I imagine you've found that as well.'

'Yes.' Daiseppe perched upon a stool. 'It's one of the reasons I went out to check the herds - I couldn't think here at Court.'

'And I'd also guess you had time to get a better idea of how your people felt about things. Gossips and rumourmongers are not the most

pleasant people to be around. They always have such a distorted view of things. And, after a while, even when you know they're wrong, you begin to doubt yourself.'

'Exactly! I'd been blaming myself for my parents' death - and thought everyone else did, too.'

Evelyn poured the mixture into the first cake pan. 'Now why would you blame yourself for an explosion in space?'

'Because it *was* my fault. They were coming to visit me at university.' Daiseppe took a deep breath, closing her turquoise eyes. 'I would have been home in another moons' cycle. If only they had waited...'

Evelyn filled another cake pan. 'And what did you discover?'

Daiseppe smiled in relief. 'That I was all wrong. Nobody blamed me. Nobody even blames me for the raiders. I'd been considering stepping down, thinking that the best thing for everyone would be for someone more experienced to rule. But...the people I met told me of their support. To them it didn't matter that I was inexperienced. I can't let that trust down.'

The Doctor surveyed the wreckage of the spaceport. He'd been meaning to check a few details, and now that Jennar was on the trail of the raiders' ship, and everyone else was attending the festival, he might be able to look around uninterrupted. He pulled out a small metal detector and began scanning the nearest twisted, smoke-streaked hulk'

Evelyn looked out at the preparations for the banquet in the courtyard below. 'Why are all those apfs in the courtyard? Is it part of the festival?'

'One or two normally,' Raien said. 'For the spring blessing. I've never seen this many before. They've been arriving for days - it seems like everyone coming for the festival brought part of their flock with them.'

Evelyn grimaced. 'Do you think it has something to do with that little rumour about an apf queen?'

'Lanium House doesn't have any flock - I think Lanium dislikes apfs for some reason. I doubt she could organise anything like this. I doubt

anyone at Court could organise this.' Raien stared wistfully into space. 'I think I'm going to apply for pasture patrol - or maybe border duty. Just quiet restful days of vicious animals jumping out and trying to kill me.'

'There's been no further raider attacks?'

'None since the queen returned to Court. Mennte House is concerned that they're planning something for the festival.'

Evelyn looked out again at the courtyard and all the possible targets. 'An attack at Court?'

Raien shrugged. 'Maybe. But the festival is celebrated at all the holdings as well. Two wings went out before sunrise - maybe to reinforce the holdings.'

'Or maybe the Doctor found something on the detectors,' Evelyn said.

The presentation of spring bouquets to the Heads of Houses went well, but Evelyn braced herself as the profession neared the apf corral for the spring blessing. Daiseppe also looked uncertain. The corral now took up a quarter of the courtyard, and a small platform for the House Heads had been built to one side.

Daiseppe mounted the steps to the platform. 'There are quite a number this year,' she said.

Eistr, House Mazeppe Head, stepped forward. 'In thanks and as honour to you, Majesty.'

'To me?'

'Yes. Many of us felt that our flocks had already received the spring blessing by your presence earlier. But you weren't able to reach all of the holdings, so we decided to bring the flocks to you. We appreciate the risks you took to ensure the apfs' welfare. The best wool of the shearings this year are yours.'

Daiseppe was speechless, but the applause and cheers of the crowd would have drowned out any reply. Evelyn looked along the platform until she located Laniun. The woman's face was expressionless, but her grip on her walking stick turned her knuckles white.

The banquet began midafternoon, and the Doctor found progress through the crowd to be a type of slide shuffle dance. Several of the Houses had decided to join in on the celebration, and buffet tables were set up outside their entrances with a variety of items. He found the guest of honour at the Queen's table, helping Daiseppe serve food to a queue.

'Evelyn, have you seen Raien?'

Evelyn looked distracted. 'No, but she's around. Wait right there. Frabel, where's the cake?'

The Doctor backed a step to allow the next person access, and bumped into someone else. He turned to see Byllesby carefully rebalancing his plate of food. 'Terribly sorry. Byllesby! I had meant to ask. Do you remember which House handled the flight?'

'Flight?'

'Flight. The one that,' the Doctor waved his hand, 'blew up?'

Byllesby stared. 'No. I... no.'

'Ah. Too bad. You see, Jennar had an interesting theory. He thought that perhaps the raiders had followed you to Mazeppe House - that perhaps *you* were their target. So then of course we started to rethink all the other deaths. Did you know that all your distant relatives here, the only House you're related to on Fapheny, are dead? Killed by raiders.'

Byllesby gaped. The Doctor noticed that there was a clear space opening around them as passers-by found other directions to move in.

'And we wondered. What if *you* had been the intended target of the ship explosion? Are you quite sure you don't remember which House handled the flight?'

'Of course he remembers,' a cold voice interrupted. 'Aerdin House. They had sole rights for passenger transport.'

The Doctor turned to face a woman dressed in an expensive layered gown. Her short brown hair had gold highlights emphasized by makeup, and she leaned lightly on a carved walking stick. 'I'm sorry; I don't believe we've met. I'm the Doctor. And you are...?'

'Laniun, of House Laniun.'

'Ah. I believe I've seen some of your ships at the spaceport. Tell me,

Laniun, how many ships does House Laniun possess?'

'We're a small company, Doctor. We had four. Two are now destroyed at the spaceport, and two more are on the other side of the blockade.'

'Yes, well, I've looked a bit closer at what's at the spaceport, and this,' he pulled out the small metal detector, 'tells me that one of those 'ships' was never spaceworthy in the first place. I would think that perhaps Jennar might find the actual ship elsewhere on the planet, along with the mercenaries you hired.'

'You hired the raiders, Laniun?' Daiseppe asked.

'Raiders? What nonsense is this? They destroyed two of my ships!'

'One,' the Doctor corrected'

'Who *is* this?' Laniun demanded. 'Daiseppe, you would take the word of this... being over mine? I am related by blood to the royals of Mirsenny! Your father welcomed me and my House to this world.'

'And because of you,' Byllesby inserted, 'another House was destroyed. Aerdin House. Your competition, I believe.'

Bells began clanging from the rooftops. 'Raiders! Take cover!'

'In fact,' Byllesby persisted, ignoring the people hurriedly dispersing around them, 'you were attempting to discredit them even before by arranging little accidents on passenger flights. Such as a bomb in a cargo hold?'

Daiseppe stared at Laniun. 'You killed my parents?'

'I had nothing to do with their deaths,' Laniun protested.

'A bomb in a cargo hold wouldn't necessarily cause a ship to explode,' the Doctor disagreed. 'Unless it was moved to somewhere else.'

Daiseppe turned toward Byllesby. 'You?'

Byllesby reached towards her. 'No! I didn't mean... I...' He whirled and lunged toward Laniun. 'Murderer!'

She sidestepped his rush and clubbed him with her stick. She backed away from the fallen Byllesby while holding her stick aloft against any other attack. 'Are you all mad? We're being attacked by raiders and you're playing detective? We need to get inside!' An explosion sounded nearby, adding emphasis to her words.

'As soon as you put that down,' Raien agreed. She moved from behind the table, her weapon pointed directly at Laniun.

Byllesby groaned, and she moved her weapon to cover both. 'Be grateful there wasn't a staircase nearby,' she said to him.

Laniun looked from Raien to Daiseppe and the Doctor. 'Stairs... you think I had something to do with Isdare's death as well?'

'Yes,' Raien said. 'Now lower that stick.'

'I've a better idea, Raien,' Annett said from behind Daiseppe. A slim blaster in her hand was pointed directly at the queen. 'You put your weapon down.'

'Annett,' Laniun said slowly, 'what are you doing?'

'Oh, Mother, isn't it obvious?' She tossed her head. 'It's time the crown passes to a royal. I tried to make Isdare see that, but she wouldn't listen. You!' She stepped closer to Daiseppe. 'I at least tried to give you a chance to step down. You weren't supposed to come back after running away. You were supposed to step down. You were supposed to give the crown to someone more experienced. To a royal.' She lifted her head proudly.

Daiseppe looked puzzled. 'But your House isn't next in line of succession.'

Raien gave a bark of laughter. 'You never did pay attention in school, Annett.'

Annett swung her blaster towards the guard. 'Stop laughing!'

An explosion shook the ground. 'Perhaps we could continue this discussion inside?' the Doctor suggested.

Byllesby struggled to his feet. 'I have more claim to royalty than you, Annett.'

Laniun tapped him on the head, knocking him back down. 'And neither of you were born here. Are you deaf as well as ignorant?' She turned to her daughter. 'You! I should have sent you to Odwin with the rest. All you learned on Homeworld was treachery. To kill the king and queen...'

'I was only trying to discredit Aerdin House,' Annett protested, 'to remove the competition. *He* moved the bomb.' The blaster swung back towards Byllesby.

'And what makes you think I wanted passenger transport? Special accommodations, meals, arrival-on-time - you make more money with cargo. If I've told you that once, I've told you dozens of times.'

A faint hum came to the Doctor's attention and he looked towards the rooftops in time to see the first wave of raiders appear. 'I definitely think we need to move indoors now.'

Annett swung her blaster towards him. 'Or, we could stay,' the Doctor amended.

'Fire!' Jennar's voice called from above.

Nets shot out from the rooftops, enveloping raiders in their folds. Airsleds emerged from hiding near the corral and rooftops, to fire additional netting.

The Doctor looked around for someone to notice. 'My idea,' he said proudly to Raien. 'The net guns. It should come in useful later for apf catching - I gather the creatures are fast?'

'No!' Annett screamed. She looked among them, her blaster aim wavering, then it finally centred on Daiseppe. 'I still have three ships out there blockading your world. Give me the crown and I will let your lives return to normal.'

'Oh, now, really,' Evelyn said. She walked up to the serving table, carrying a cake. 'Haven't you been listening?'

Annett turned toward her. 'I've had enough of you.'

'Yes. And I've had quite enough of you,' Evelyn said, and flung the cake in her hands into the woman's face. 'I've always wanted to do that,' she remarked.

Annett clawed cake and icing out of her eyes. 'My dress!'

She started to raise the blaster, but a blur of blue and cream suddenly barrelled into her, followed by another and another. Laniun sneezed, and Daiseppe helped the older woman climb atop the table.

'Looks like the corral broke,' Raien said, pulling Byllesby to his feet and trying to avoid the swiftly moving apfs. The Doctor found himself surrounded by long necked animals nuzzling his hair and sniffing at his coat.

Laniun kept talking amid her sneezes. 'Give an Heir responsibility and look what happens. Those shipmasters will rue the day they didn't

check orders with me. Mercenaries! On my ships! I'll have to have each ship decontaminated down to the very bolts - assuming I have any ships left after reparations. Majesty, you have my deepest apologies. Laniun House will make whatever amends you deem necessary.'

Evelyn studied the woman's watering eyes. 'You're allergic to apf wool! So that explains the offworld fabrics and your fierce...' she modified her first choice of words '...intentness during the blessing. You were trying not to sneeze.'

Raien waded back into the stampede to pull Annett to her feet. The Doctor shooed the curious apfs away from his hair. 'Interesting choice of weaponry, there, Evelyn. Local delicacy?'

'I'll make you another cake,' Evelyn said, dusting off her hands.

'Cake? Was that my cake?' the Doctor asked, horrified. 'I didn't even get a taste!'

Irresistible Force

R. J. ANDERSON

My name is Jessica Reislander. I have a master's degree in sociology and anthropology from the University of Waterloo. My graduate thesis, on the cultural response to violent crime within Toronto's Portuguese community, was hailed as an impressive achievement: it earned me a few hearty back-pats from my professors, my name engraved on a couple of plaques, and the somewhat useful sum of $500. What it did not earn me, however - and I really should have known this when I started - was a job.

So I cut hair.

It's not so bad once you get through the training. If you can suppress the urge to murder the old bat who tells you to take two inches off her layers and then screams that you've scalped her, or maintain an air of professional detachment as you watch your black-haired client's platinum blonde colour treatment turn green, you can survive pretty much anything.

I try to tell myself it's good practical research, that I might even write it up one day. *A Brief Analysis of the Stylist-Customer Dynamic*. *Some Observations on the Social Hierarchy of the Salon*. After all, you have to think positive, right? This job will eat your soul if you let it. And it isn't forever, just until I can find something in my field.

It's been two years.

I'm between customers now, washing hair and soap out of the sinks, trying not to look at the mirror above me. I know there are blue circles under my brown eyes, and my hair, which is supposed to be a testament to the salon's collective genius, looks like it's been nibbled by rats. I have so far resisted the pressure to get it tinted or streaked. Medium Dirt may not be the world's most popular shade, but I've got this superstitious fear that if I give in, I'll be stuck here for the rest of my life.

The door opens with a jingle of bells. I look up automatically - this is

my customer, the other girls are still busy - and see a man standing by the entrance, gazing around with a sort of distracted fascination. Not one of my regulars. Not anyone's regular anything, by the looks of him, in a frock-coat and stripy trousers, V-neck sweater in the middle of August, red question-marks embroidered on his lapels. Either the Halloween parties have started way too early this year, or this guy's a serious eccentric.

It just goes to show I'm not a stylist at heart: it takes me thirty seconds to scan from the scuffed white leather of his shoes to his serene, yet oddly ancient blue eyes before I realise how badly his hair needs cutting. It hangs in a ragged fringe across his forehead and brushes the co llar of his shirt, curling a little in the heat.

He is, I admit to myself grudgingly, kind of cute.

'Hullo,' he says. And yes, that is exactly how he says it, which means he isn't from this side of the Atlantic, or anywhere south of the equator. He's got a lovely voice. I suck in my breath, shift my weight from one shoe to the other.

'Hi. How can I help you?'

'Rather obvious, I should think,' he says, a little ruefully, and tugs at his fringe. 'Wash and trim, nothing fancy - I'm a creature of habit.'

'Funny, you don't look like a nun.'

Idiot. I should know better. But he gives me a smile that radiates delight, and I feel myself relax. 'Wordplay,' he says, crossing the room toward me with the light, springy step of an athlete, 'is the hallmark of all civilised conversation. Puns notwithstanding.' He sticks out his hand. 'I'm the Doctor. And you?'

My clients rarely ask me my name. I've cut some people's hair four, five times, and they still don't know me from Eve. I say, "Jessica," and take the hand he offers, wondering what makes him so different, so alive. His grasp is cool, yet warm; firm but not constricting. The perfect friendly handshake: it practically vibrates sincerity. I have to remind myself to let go.

'This way, please,' I hear somebody say, in a calm professional voice that can't possibly be mine, and yet he's right behind me as I walk to the sinks. He shrugs off his long, square-tailed jacket and hangs it on the stand; then he sits down in the nearest chair, tips his

head back into the washbasin. All at once his throat is bare, vulnerable. I might even say tempting, if I were Sweeney Todd.

Fortunately for him, I'm not. I drape the plastic apron over his shoulders, fasten it loosely about his neck; then I squeeze myself in between the sinks and turn the taps on, running the water against my wrist to make sure the temperature's right. Glancing down at his upturned face, I see his eyes are already closed. He trusts me, or perhaps he simply trusts everyone; it's hard to tell which.

At the touch of the warm water he gives a little, contented sigh, and his long body sinks deeper into the chair. My hands, full of herb-scented shampoo and cornsilk hair, begin their rhythmic journey back and forth across his scalp, and the corners of his mouth curl up in a sleepy smile. I look away, telling myself sternly that I need a life.

'So,' I begin in my best casual tone, 'do you travel much?'

It's a stock question, I've used it a thousand times, but his reaction tells me I've hit a nerve. His eyes snap open, startled, and he almost lifts his head from the sink before I stroke his hair back, calming him down.

'Quite a lot, actually,' he replies, but now his voice is cautious, and I can feel his tension. I continue to stroke, weaving my fingers through the wet strands, working the shampoo in. Very few people can stay tense when I give them a scalp massage; it's one of my more useful talents.

'You're lucky,' I tell him. 'I've hardly been anywhere. To Lisbon, once, a few summers back; and I took a week's vacation last year in Vancouver, but that's about it.'

He's relaxed again, surrendering to the seduction of my fingertips, his eyelids drooping closed. 'Ah, yes. Lisbon. Lovely city. Do you speak Portuguese?'

'A little. I'd like to go back some day, brush up on my vocabulary.'

'Not a bad idea,' he agrees.

Now I'm rinsing his hair, watching the suds swirl down the drain. I squirt conditioner into my palms, spread its cool smoothness over his scalp. He hardly needs it; his hair's so soft.

'So, do you travel for business?' I ask. 'Or pleasure?'

'I suppose you might say a little of both.'

'By yourself?' Okay, so that was pretty transparent. Fortunately he doesn't seem to notice.

'No, I take friends along.' He pauses, a little awkwardly, and adds, 'Usually.'

'Not this time, I take it.'

'Yes. Well.' He shifts in the chair, as though the admission makes him uncomfortable. 'It's just that sometimes... one has to do things on one's own.'

'I know what you mean. I had three roommates the summer I went to Lisbon, and in the beginning they were great, but then they started to bicker, and one girl got the sulks, and by the end of six weeks I thought I'd lose my mind.'

'Yes!' His eyes open wide again, but this time his voice holds only relief. 'Yes, quite. What did you do?'

Rinsing the last of the conditioner from his hair, I fold a towel around it, gently pat it dry. 'I hopped out on them and took a week-long bus tour. At the time I felt pretty selfish, but later I realised it would have been stupid to stay around, because I'd only have blown up at them and spoiled the whole trip. Anyway, it gave them something to think about. I won't say things were perfect when I got back, but it did help.' I let the towel drop back into the sink. 'Come with me.'

Obligingly he follows me over to my chair, sits down in front of the mirror. I crank him up a few notches, pull a fine-toothed comb out of the Barbicide jar and begin to smooth the damp spikes of his hair back into place. For a few moments neither one of us says anything, while I measure and snip, measure and snip, wisps of pale hair drifting over my hands and down onto the floor. There's one big drawback when you cut men's hair; it's so fine it gets everywhere, into your socks, your underwear, even under your skin. Right now, however, it seems a small price to pay, and I keep cutting.

'So you're from... England?' I ask at last.

'I've spent some time there,' he replies, in a light but firm tone that tells me I'm not going to get any further with that question.

'And how long do you plan to be in Canada? If that isn't to nosy.'

'Not long,' he says. 'I've just got someone to track down, and once I find him, that'll be the end of it.'

'Here in town, you mean?'

'Well... in this area, at least.'

'What's his name? I might know him.' Not very likely, of course, since Waterloo's a big place, but it never hurts to try.

'I don't know what name he's using,' says the Doctor, obediently bending his head forward as I trim the fine hairs at the back of his neck.

'Oh,' I say. 'That could be difficult.'

'Yes,' he replies, and now he sounds serious, and more than a little troubled. I wonder who he's looking for, and why. I wonder if I could help him. I'm off work in a couple of hours; I could show him around, if he'd let me. I'm about to say something to this effect when I hear a sharp crack, like a pebble striking glass, and Janelle Taylor, who works the chair beside mine, spins around as though she's been slapped, and crumples.

My cheek is wet, and there are red polka dots on my sleeve. Janelle's hair forms a loose fan on the floor, and it, too, is red, although she had it bleached two days ago. I can't see her face. Her customer, a tiny woman in her seventies, lets out a hoarse, hysterical scream.

I stand there with the scissors in my hand, gaping stupidly. In an instant the Doctor is on his feet, tearing the plastic apron away from his throat, stooping over Janelle.

'She's dead,' he says, and although his voice is soft, it is also furious. His eyes meet mine, blazing blue and terrifyingly old in that young, guileless face'

'She's dead,' I echo, hearing the words without really -registering what they mean - that, among other things, the engagement ring on Janelle's finger will never have a wedding band to match, and that somebody else is going to have to do Mrs. McMurtry's impossible colour treatments from now on.

'I've got to stop him,' says the Doctor, and he flings the apron down beside Janelle and sprints for the door.

There is absolutely no good reason for what I do next. It might be that I can feel Janelle's blood on my face and on my sleeve, and if I look at her any more I am guaranteed to throw up. It might be that the sobs of my co-workers and the panicked shrieks of the customers are

ringing in my ears, and I have to get away from the sound before it drives me crazy. It might be that I just can't bear not knowing what will happen if I don't.

Whatever the reason, I grab my purse and run after him.

By the time I dash across the shopping plaza's narrow park strip to the sidewalk beyond, I've nearly lost sight of the Doctor, he's that fast, and that determined. Fortunately, even in somewhat lowered condition I've retained enough vanity to jog two kilometres a day and take aerobics classes. I might not able to catch up with the Doctor, but I can at least keep pace.

What I can't figure out is where the killer thinks he's going to hide. This is a semi-residential area, on a busy street: the houses are widely spaced, interspersed with gas stations, convenience stores, and the occasional strip mall. There just isn't a lot of cover, and he should be easy to spot. Yet I can't see anyone ahead of the Doctor, and judging from the way he slows down, glancing from side to side with a kind of hurt perplexity, neither can he.

'Wrong way?' I pant as I catch up to him in the parking lot of Mac's Milk.

'Can't be,' says the Doctor, sounding irritated. 'The other way was too open.'

'Car?'

He shakes his head impatiently. His hair is nearly dry now, and I can see I've done a good job of it. As if that matters. 'I'd have seen it.'

It's at that point, belatedly, that I realise there's something even odder about the Doctor than his clothes and his name: after all that running - a good four blocks at least - he isn't even breathing hard. The summer heat has sapped my energy and plastered my T-shirt to my skin, but he's still wearing that ludicrous cricket sweater, and he looks as fresh as when he walked into the salon twenty minutes ago.

Surreptitiously I sidle closer to him and take a sniff. He smells of linen and cotton wool and the apple-scented conditioner I used on his hair, but nothing more. When all of this is over, I tell myself, I'm going to find out where he buys his deodorant. 'Well,' I begin hesitantly, 'if he didn't go east and he didn't go west -'

'Up!' shouts the Doctor, and he's off again, long legs flying, back toward the plaza.

There's nothing to do but follow him. Though as I'm running, it dawns on me that chasing down an armed murderer who may well have found himself a nice high vantage point from which to shoot me is not the most intelligent way I could be spending my Wednesday afternoon.

If this has occurred to the Doctor, however, it doesn't seem to worry him. As soon as we reach the comer of the plaza he swarms up one of the pillars and launches himself over the edge of the roof with a reckless ease that leaves me gaping. I have to run around the back of the plaza before I can find my own way up, and by that time he's halfway across the roof.

Up here the air shimmers with heat, and bits of black tar and Gravel weld themselves to the soles of my shoes. Panting, I trail after the Doctor, picking my way around the pipes and ventilators. Lots of places here, I think, for a psychopath to hide. But not for long: somebody has to have called the police by now, and if I strain my ears I can almost hear the sirens in the distance.

The Doctor, still well ahead of me, appears to have found something. He stoops, peels a Post-It Note off the side of an absurdly gigantic air conditioner that must belong to the supermarket, and frowns at it with a severity I haven't seen since Dr. Warriner caught me napping in the middle of Social Statistics.

'What's it -' I start to yell at him, but at that same moment the Doctor crumples his fist around the note and whirls, staring down into the parking lot. I follow the line of his gaze to a small space between a blue Saturn and a rusty black Ford, where somebody's little girl - seven or eight at the most - is pushing a doll carriage back and forth across the pavement.

It's an expensive-looking carriage, lace-trimmed and gleaming with newness. By contrast, the child pushing it is almost absurdly grubby, with scraped knees under her faded jean shorts and a tangled brown ponytail coming free of its holder. Only the smile of pure happiness on her face makes her beautiful.

The Doctor holds very still, his eyes fixed on the child. I crunch my way over to him, but he doesn't even seem to register my presence.

His lips move, rapidly but soundlessly, as though he's trying to solve some convoluted mental equation.

Between his fingers, I can see what's left of the scrap of yellow paper he pulled off the A/C unit. I take his hand very gently, so as not to disturb his concentration, and pull the paper free. When I unfold it I see four words written in a clear, unembellished script.

TICK. TICK. TICK. TICK.

There is no colour in the Doctor's face: even his lips are white. He says in a tight voice, 'Stay here, Jessica. Stay down.' And before I can stop him, or even ask what he thinks he's doing, he swings himself down over the edge of the roof, hangs a moment by his fingertips, and drops to the pavement below.

I watch him approach the child, his steps quick but light, his posture loose and carefully unthreatening. He sits down on his heels beside her, bringing his face to her level, and the two of them exchange a few words. The little girl looks puzzled, but seems not to be afraid of the Doctor, and after a moment she steps back and lets him inspect her precious toy.

Once in possession of the carriage, the Doctor doesn't waste a second. He hares off across the parking lot with it, pushing it furiously ahead of him, away from the cars. To my surprise, the child doesn't chase after him. Perhaps she's too shocked to move. I know that I would be, if a grown man took off with my brand-new doll carriage.

At almost the same moment, a woman rushes out from the plaza. Babbling incoherent apologies, she wraps her arms around the child and drags her away from the cars. I can hear the little girl wail thinly as they vanish back into the supermarket - probably to call 911 and howl about the Bad Man Who Frightened Little Kimmy. On the other side of the parking lot, the Doctor gives the carriage a last, desperate shove and sprints back toward the plaza. I realise then that he thinks it's going to explode, and for some inexplicable reason - mild hysteria, possibly - I start to laugh.

I am still laughing when the cars blow up.

'Jessica!' The Doctor's voice is low, urgent; his arms wrap around me, holding me as I shake. I have seen plenty of explosions on television, I

remind myself fiercely, even as I turn to him and push my face against his shoulder. I have seen lots and lots of cars explode in a hideous screeching blossom of fire that almost killed the little girl who had stood there, played there, barely a minute earlier--

'Jessica! It's all right. No one was hurt. Though,' he adds grimly, 'only by sheer luck. I should have known better.'

'He was trying to kill her.' My voice sounds like a hiccup. 'Why was he trying to kill her? Just a child -'

'I'm leaving now, Jessica.' He detaches himself from me, but gently, holding me at arm's length. 'The police have arrived, and I don't have time for their questions. Especially since they're bound to ask all the wrong ones.'

'You mean - you're just walking away from a crime scene?' I pull back to stare at him. 'When you're the star witness?'

'I've no choice. Not just now.'

'But - Doctor -' That name is never going to sound right, but apparently it's all I've got. 'They'll think you had something to do with it.'

The muscles in his jaw tighten' 'No doubt. And unfortunately, they wouldn't be far wrong.'

'What?'

'Our vicious friend had rigged up a reverse-proximity detonator.' He springs to his feet, begins fishing about in his pockets. 'As soon as I pushed the carriage more than fifty metres away from the car, the bomb went off - aha.' With an air of satisfaction he produces a crumpled twenty-dollar bill, presses it into my hand. 'For your time.'

Almost frantically I push it back at him. 'You'd have to pay me more than that to get me back down there. I'm going with you.'

'Jessica, I haven't time to argue -'

'Good.' My voice is still shaky, but I fight to keep it level. 'Then let's go.'

He gives me a long, hard look, which I return with as much determination as I can muster. At last, without another word, he turns and heads for the back of the plaza. I follow him, scrambling down onto the lid of a rancid-smelling dumpster. Reluctantly he helps me to the ground - he's strong, for all his slightness, I can feel it - and we set off at a brisk trot toward the nearby suburbs.

Though I move like a robot, still stiff with the shock of the explosion, my mind is churning. The note, with its mocking suggestion of a bomb. The incongruous juxtaposition of filthy girl and clean carriage, her face shining with the pride of new ownership. She had driven it back and forth so intently between those same two cars, when there was a whole parking lot to explore. Why?

My heart skips a beat. 'Doctor,' I blurt, 'he spoke to her! He gave her the carriage and told her what to do. She knows what he looks like.'

'I know.'

'But we have to go back! She could -'

'We can't. Trust me, Jessica' It won't do any good.'

That Post-It note was more than a morbid joke - it was a challenge. The killer knew he was being pursued. He had counted on someone to intervene, someone clever enough to notice the oddity of the girl and the carriage, and brave enough to take action.

I stop short. 'You know him. The guy who shot Janelle. That's who you were -'

'I thought I was chasing him,' the Doctor murmurs, his face darkening with penitence. 'I believed he was on the run, afraid of being caught. I never expected he would turn it into a game.'

My hands close around his arm. 'Are you saying,' I ask very slowly and distinctly, 'that Janelle, the girl, the bomb, all of this, was just a psychopath's way of saying "Tag, you're it"?'

His fair, shining head bends a little, in acquiescence or perhaps in shame. 'I've got to stop him,' he says again. 'Whatever it takes.'

'I suppose you might call him a stowaway,' the Doctor half-shouts at me, his voice barely audible above the engine's throbbing drone. We are on the bus, heading for the city's outskirts; I'd wanted to go downtown, but the Doctor is determined not to involve any more innocents. 'I was visiting a little pl- a place you won't have heard of, and strayed into what you might call the wrong part of town. Anyway, I must have attracted our nasty friend's notice, because he got a hold of my friend Turlough, and followed him back to the - our vehicle. I had an inkling that something wasn't quite right, but I couldn't pin it down, and

in the end none of us knew he was there until we arrived in Washington.'

'That must be some "vehicle",' I say dryly. Even when I could afford a car, I never got into it without checking the back seat. I can only assume he means a plane, though why he's being so coy I can't begin to guess. Unless he's rich as Oprah and doesn't want anyone to know it.

'Quite,' says the Doctor. 'At any rate, by the time I discovered our unwanted passenger, he'd already jumped ship, so to speak, and helped himself to some rather dangerous medical equipment in the process. My companions had planned a holiday, but I told them they'd better go on without me. There was a bit of an argument, which didn't solve anything, and in the end I just slipped off. For their own good, really: they wouldn't have been safe if they'd come with me.' He gives me a severe look. 'And speaking of which -'

'I'm perfectly safe right now. Go on.'

He sighs, but I know he hasn't really given up. 'At any rate, I'd no idea just how dangerous my stowaway really was. Within a day or two of our arrival in Washington he had latched on to a lonely and unstable man, armed him with a terrible weapon, and created a serial killer.' He pauses, glancing out the window at the line of red maples flicking past. 'Have you heard about the "Nemesis" murders?'

'They probably did a story about them on CNN or something, but no.'

'Probably for the best - the details were very nasty. At any rate, six people died. And by the time I tracked Clarence Mortensen down, he'd committed suicide, and the real killer had escaped.'

I frown. 'So you're saying the guy we're after doesn't actually dirty his own hands? He uses other people to kill for him?'

'I'm afraid so.' The Doctor looks bleak. 'Which means that even if the police manage to catch the man who shot Janelle, they won't actually have the murderer.'

'So he's a master blackmailer?' I ask, trying to ignore the chill creeping up my spine. 'Or does he just have a lot of disposable income, and a knack for finding people who will do anything for hire?'

The Doctor appears to consider this carefully. At last he says,

'Neither, really. I suppose you might say that he has a particular knack for coercion. He knows just how to find your weak points, and by the time you recognise what's happening, it's too late to escape.'

'Brainwashing, then. Hypnosis.'

'If you like.'

'So why didn't he try it on you, then? Or did he?'

'I'm quite sure that he did,' says the Doctor. 'Only I've got my own resources when it comes to that sort of thing, and he wouldn't have found me easy prey.'

'But now you seem to think he's hunting you after all. What does he want?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor admits. 'Are you still sure you want to be involved?'

The question startles me. 'Are you giving me a choice?'

'Well, I can hardly throw you off the bus, if that's what you mean. I'd prefer you weren't tangled up in this, but it seems to have happened, just the same.'

'You sound like you're used to this.'

His mouth twitches ruefully. 'Well, as a matter of fact, I am.'

'Then I want to come with you,' I tell him. 'I want to help, if I can. And if I can't, I've at least got enough sense to keep out of the line of fire. I assume you're carrying a gun?'

Something flickers across his eyes, stronger than distaste, almost - hard as it is to believe - horror. 'Certainly not.'

I am still mulling over this rather alarming piece of information when he reaches up a long arm and pulls the bel.'

'I think we've gone far enough,' he says.

EASTWOOD BUSINESS PARK, says the sign where we get off the bus. It's past suppertime; few of the windows in the glassy buildings are lit, and the road through the complex is nearly deserted. In silence, because the Doctor seems to be deep in thought and I can't think of a good reason to interrupt him, we follow the path between the buildings until we reach the fountain.

It is, I have to say, a pretty ugly fountain. I suppose it could be worse - I'm not exactly fond of spitting cherubs either - but the pile of

steel girders in the middle of the basin looks like it fell from the top floor during construction and nobody had the heart to clean it up. However, it is no doubt an insanely expensive piece of modern art, and my inability to appreciate its subtleties only betrays my bourgeois tastes. Or something like that.

'Good heavens, what a hideous sculpture,' says the Doctor in mild surprise. He dusts off the square edge of the basin and sits down. 'Have a seat, Jessica. We may have to wait some time.'

'You really think he's coming?' Confidence like the Doctor's can be compelling, but so is my common sense, and right now the two are wildly at odds. 'Even if he knew where to find you, why on earth would he come all the way out here?'

'He'll fmd me.' The Doctor's pale brows are lifted, his eyes unfocused, as though gazing at something only he can see. 'He knows the taste of my mind, even if he can't penetrate it. And he knows I don't want anyone else hurt. He's been waiting for this, forcing my hand. He won't want to miss his chance now.'

I regard him a moment in blank astonishment. 'The what of your mind? Doctor, no offence, but are you entirely sane?'

One corner of his mouth turns up. 'I'm afraid so.'

'So you're just sitting out here for - what? As bait?'

'You could put it that way, yes.' He looks down at the hand resting on his knees. 'If you're frightened, Jessica, then go. There's bound to be another bus in a few minutes.'

'I'm not frightened,' I tell him, and it's very nearly true. 'Anyway, I'm not leaving.' And that is the truth, because if this weirdo is going to show up after all, I sure don't want to meet him coming off the next bus.

'So,' I continue after a moment's pause, 'what do you think makes this guy tick?'

He looks thoughtful. 'It's hard to say. His people were peaceful once. Many of them still are, though for the last two centuries they've been suffering under oppressive military rule. Their natural curiosity and empathy, their respect for life in all its forms made them easy prey for conquest, and for decades they refused to do anything but appeal to their enemies. As the conquerors became more secure in their control

of the pl- the place, however, they also became more brutal, and some of the natives decided it was time to fight back.'

It sounds like eastern Europe to me, and I'm about to say so when I remember that in addition to being an eccentric billionare, the Doctor seems to be involved in some sort of international intelligence operations. If my guesses get to accurate, he might stop talking. So I play dumb, and merely look at him expectantly as he continues:

'Their name for themselves means "Watchers", and that's really been their traditional role - simply to observe and learn from those around them. But the new generation call themselves "Riders". I knew it was a dramatic change in philosophy, but I was naive enough to think they would only try to influence their armies.' He pauses, adds quietly, 'That's the trouble with evil. No matter how pragmatically it starts out, it always grows beyond reason.'

'And no matter how many times you encounter it, it still takes you by surprise.'

His head comes up sharply, and he fixes me with that penetrating, oddly ancient gaze.

'Doesn't it?' I say. 'I think that's why I wanted to be a sociologist.' It's an embarrassing admission, but he ought to know at least that much. 'To try and predict evil somehow, anticipate it. Maybe even prevent it... though realistically that doesn't seem possible.'

'Is that why you gave up?'

Pride tells me to take exception to that remark, to protest that my jobless state is the result of an unfair hiring process, and that I am not just an idealist in a sulk: but honesty wins out, and I look at my hands. 'Maybe.'

A light touch on my chin makes me lift my head up again, meet his searching blue eyes. 'Jessica,' he says. 'You're right. We can't stop all evil, or even most of it. But together we might just be able to stop this one. So tell me, Jessica-the-Sociologist, what do you think?'

The candour in his gaze takes my breath away. How can he believe in me, when I don't even believe in myself? And yet there's no refusing the question - I owe him at least that much.

'Well,' I say shakily, I'm a little rusty, but I'll give it my best shot...'

'Someone's coming,' breathes the Doctor, and nudges me awake. I sit up, blinking, rubbing the cable-knit pattern embossed on my cheek, and realise with some embarrassment that I have drooled all over his shoulder. Granted that waiting around for hours, even with company, can be pretty dull; but even so I must have been a lot more tired than I thought.

The sun has nearly set, and among the long shadows of the trees another, smaller shadow is flickering. He looks about fifteen, a lanky figure with gel-spiked hair, thin shoulders slouched under the weight of his denim jacket. And speaking of jackets, I don't have one, and I'm starting to wish I did. The breeze raises the hairs on my arms, and I shiver.

'If that's him,' the Doctor murmurs in my ear, 'he doesn't seem to have noticed us.'

'I don't think it is,' I reply, shifting closer to his warmth. 'There's a whole co-op development behind that rise: the kid probably came out here to sneak a cigarette.'

'Hmm. Perhaps.' He sounds almost idiotically vague, but then he pulls his sweater off and drops it around my shoulders, and it's clear that he doesn't miss much.

'You've really got a thing about question marks,' I observe, thrusting my arms into the too-long sleeves. The warmth is bliss, but then, so is the view. I am still grinning foolishly at him when the firecracker goes off, making us both jump. The Doctor tackles me to the pavement, which I'd almost enjoy if it weren't for a sudden tearing pain in my left arm and the belated recollection that firecrackers don't travel at 1,500 feet per second.

'You're bleeding.' He whips a handkerchief out of his pocket and knots it around my arm, so fast and so tight I don't even have time to yelp. Then he's on his feet, running toward the boy, who unexpectedly panics, drops the gun, and bolts for cover.

Amateurs, I think sourly, and lift the makeshift bandage to peer at the wound in my arm. It isn't deep - hardly more than a bloody scratch - but it certainly smarts, and there's no saving the sweater, which is already starting to unravel where the bullet passed through. The Doctor and the punk kid are out of sight behind the nearest building, so I go for

the weapon instead.

If you don't count the kind that squirts water, I've never handled a gun. Too late I remember that I should have picked it up with something other than my bare hands, but no doubt the police can sort the fingerprints out afterward. The weight of it surprises me, and the slippery feeling of the grip tells me the boy's terror wasn't feigned. He probably thought it was all a joke until the thing actually went off.

I am still gazing stupidly at the gun when the Doctor comes pounding back toward me. 'He's gone inside,' he says. 'We should stay together.'

'Here.' Awkwardly, I push the gun into his hands. But to my astonishment he lets it slide through his fingers, and it thumps back into the grass at our feet. 'Doctor -'

'Don't argue,' he snaps at me. 'Hurry!' And without waiting for an answer he sprints away across the lawn. I snatch up the gun again - it seems stupid to just leave it lying there - and run after him.

Either someone's working late tonight, or the custodial staff's pretty careless, because the door opens easily to the Doctor's tug, and silence is our only greeting. Our footsteps echo dully against the marble floor as we enter, glancing cautiously from one side of the lobby to the other.

'Take the gun,' I hiss at the Doctor. 'You might have to use it.'

'No,' he says flatly.

'Why on earth -'

'Because I might have to use it. And that's not what I do.'

'Why not? Lousy aim?'

The Doctor bounces across the lobby and stabs the elevator button, which fails to light up. 'Aha,' he pronounces with a peculiar relish, flings the stairwell door open and vanishes.

I follow him, physically and verbally. 'Doctor, why not?'

He's half a flight ahead of me, long legs taking the stairs two at a time.

'Shhh,' he says. 'He'll hear us.'

The stairwell is a good five storeys high. By the time we reach the top, with no sight of our quarry, I'm gasping like a landed fish, and my arm throbs fiercely. 'Why did we -'

'The only lighted windows were on this floor,' whispers the Doctor.

He pulls the door open a crack and slides his long body through. I push myself after him, trying not to wheeze.

We emerge into a wide corridor. The doorway on the right suggests a boardroom, but the double doors are locked, and no light escapes from beneath. I glance at the windows to our left, just in time to see the sun wink at us and disappear, abandoning us to the semi-darkness.

'Are you sure it was this floor?' I ask the Doctor, looking dubiously down the hall. All the doors are shut, and the only artificial light I can see is the dismal red glow of the EXIT sign behind us.

'Positive. He must have turned out the lights when he heard us coming.'

'Maybe he thinks we're playing Sardines.'

The Doctor's mouth twitches wryly. 'In a way, he is. Only if you found him, he'd hide with you, instead of the other way around. And I don't think you'd consider yourself the winner. Stay close, Jessica.'

He doesn't have to tell me that twice. I'd be holding his hand if I had the nerve.

We tiptoe down the hallway, listening intently at every door, but there's no sound. Then the corridor bends at a right angle, and we nearly run smack into another door. Through the frosted glass a dim light glows, and all at once I feel my stomach trying to crawl up my throat. I tighten my grip on the gun, but apparently you have to know how to use one to find it even remotely comforting.

'It's all right,' says the Doctor, and reaches for my hand, but it happens to be the hand with the gun in it, and he recoils. 'Don't tell me you've still got that thing.'

I don't say anything. He looks at me a moment, a little sadly, then turns back to the door.

He never gets to open it, though. There's a muffled bang, and the door flies open and whacks us both off our feet. My shoulder hits the wall, my left arm erupts with pain, and I drop the gun. By the time I can pick it up again, the kid's all over the Doctor.

By rights it shouldn't be much of a struggle; the boy is half his weight. And yet when one bony fist hits the Doctor's jaw, his head snaps back. He reels, but only for a second, and then he grabs the kid by the shoulders and pushes him into the door. If this were an action

movie it would shatter spectacularly and the punk would go tumbling out the other side, but the double layer of safety glass doesn't even crack, and he just launches himself at the Doctor again.

I realise now that the Doctor's holding back: he doesn't want to hurt the boy. Neither one of them speaks, they merely grapple with each other in a clumsy, desperate fashion, until in a sudden fluid movement the Doctor twists the younger man around, wrenches his arm up behind his back and kicks his feet out from under him. He lands hard on the carpet with the Doctor's knee between his shoulder blades, and doesn't move.

A peculiar gulping sound comes from the teenager's mouth - he's had the wind knocked out of him, and he's trying to cry and get his breath back at the same time. This seems completely normal to me, but the Doctor looks startled. He releases the boy abruptly and steps back.

'He was only trying to escape,' he says.

'Let me - go,' sobs the boy. 'Got to - get away - can't let it - get me again.'

'I'm a fool,' breathes the Doctor with sudden fervour, and plunges through the doorway.

I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. If I follow, the kid will get away - and I've got no reason to believe he isn't dangerous. A boy prepared to shoot at a stranger just because another stranger tells him to might be capable of nearly anything, and for all I know he might have been the one who shot Janelle-

But the Doctor takes the decision out of my hands. 'Come on,' he insists, and his arm loops out from behind the door and drags me after him.

The light turns out to be coming from an open doorway about ten feet down the hall. The only sound from within is the soft clicking of a computer keyboard, which seems pretty innocuous. Except that it's too fast, and not rhythmic enough - it sounds more like someone punching keys at random, merely pretending to type.

'It's him,' the Doctor whispers. 'Be careful, Jessica. If he jumps at you, run.'

But he won't jump, I think. Not yet. Not if he wants to talk to the Doctor first.

We step cautiously into the bar of light, stand there side by side, looking into the small office. There's a middle-aged woman sitting at the computer, surrounded by crumpled papers, a scattering of dust-cloths, and an overturned pail. Her salt-andpepper hair is screwed up into a bun and there's a gauzy sort of cap over it. That and the extreme plainness of her dress, coupled incongruously with ankle socks and cheap sneakers, marks her as one of the local Mennonites. Not old-order, or she wouldn't be working outside the home: but devout enough - and no way the kind of person who would do anything for a psychopath, no matter how forceful or persuasive.

'It's a mistake,' I mouth furiously at the Doctor. 'The kid tricked us.'

'I don't think so,' says the Doctor, and steps into the room. Still, the woman continues her vigorous, uneven tapping on the keys. She doesn't turn, or look up. We might as well not be there.

The Doctor addresses her softly. 'Loonoo. Enough. This has to end.'

Tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap.

Suddenly, she jerks and collapses, tumbling bonelessly out of the chair. There's a flash as something purple whips out of her nose and across her cheek, and the Doctor and I both jump back in alarm. 'Jessica!' he shouts, but it's too late because at that exact second a skinny hand grabs my shoulder, and my stomach lurches at the prick of a knife beneath my ear.

'Divide and conquer,' sneers the kid. His hand slides down to my wounded arm, squeezes with deliberate malice, and I nearly choke with the effort not to cry out. 'It never occurred to you, did it, that I could be in two places at once?'

'Very clever,' says the Doctor flatly. His hands are raised in a silent, unmistakable appeal: don't hurt her. Let's talk about this. 'It must take a great deal of energy, though - you obviously weren't in full control of the boy until now. You're going to revert to your solid state if you're not careful.'

He's telling me something, I know, or he's trying to. The only problem is that it makes absolutely no sense. Solid state ? The kid feels solid enough to me, and so does the cold metal against my neck.

All at once he makes a wet snorting noise, and his voice sounds stronger as he retorts:

'One more is all I need - now I've got you here.'

'Loonoo, no!' shouts the Doctor. I have no idea what he's talking about.

'Loonoo'? More like loony, if you ask me.

Then I feel it, slick and muscular, slithering up my neck toward my chin, and I open my mouth to scream but that's the stupidest thing I could have done because it's too fast and now it's in my mouth my throat my nose my oh my g--

And just like that, I'm someone else.

His name is Llwnw (not Loonoo), and he's cavalier. I know that. No, he's a cavalier, a Rider; he's just feeding me the French word because the double meaning amuses him. He's rummaging through my mind, tossing thoughts and memories around like scrap paper, settling into my skin - and I can't stop him. There's nowhere to hide, and I'm trapped in my own psyche, with an alien in complete control of my body, my voice, and my will.

I hate him. I've never hated anyone so much in my life. And the worst of it is, I let him in.

At least Llwnw tells me that's the case. I was tired, I was afraid, I was angry at the Doctor and at myself for being fooled, and my defences were down. Strong emotion always helps. With Clarence Mortensen it was envy--a bitter, consuming jealousy of those more confident, attractive, and successful than himself. The material for murder was there: all it took was a molecular scalpel and a good hard push. Llwnw had been intrigued to see how far he could drive the man, and how long: he'd never ridden a Terran before, and for a time he quite enjoyed himself leaving messy puzzles for the police. But in the end Mortensen's guilt and horror became tedious, and it was time to move on.

Muriel Harris was seventy-eight and too nervous to drive outside her own neighbourhood, but the Doctor was on Llwnw's trail and he needed to get out of Washington. He rode her mercilessly across three states and well over the Canadian border, twelve hours without a rest, until exhaustion and terror overwhelmed her and she drove straight into

a guardrail on the 401. If the old Monte Carlo had not been so huge, both of them would have died; as it was, Llwnw recovered from the shock and slipped free of the old woman just seconds before her heart gave out.

I don't want to know this. I don't want to hear this. But can't make him stop.

With days to spare before the Doctor picked up his trail, it amused Llwnw to accumulate a number of surprises with which to greet the Time Lord (Time Lord?), including explosives, a pistol, and somewhat whimsically, a doll carriage. Riding one human after another, influencing them with varying degrees of subtlety, he was able to keep an eye on the Doctor's activities - right up to the point where he decided that, with his quarry apparently nowhere in evidence, he might spare a moment for a haircut....

'Let her go, Llwnw,' says the Doctor fiercely. 'She's no good to you.'

'Isn't she?' The creature chuckles, with my larynx, my throat, and I could scream with rage if only he'd let me. 'On the contrary, Time Lord. She's as useful as a primitive creature can be. This one, on the other hand...' and he turns my body around and points the gun at the boy standing slack-jawed behind me, stupefied by the horror of what he's just been through, and I can't stop him heaven help me I cannot make him stop and my finger closes around the trigger--

A paperweight hurtles past my left ear and hits the boy with a resounding smack, and he crumples just as the gun goes off. The bullet misses him by inches, smashes a splintered hole in the woodwork, and before Llwnw can make me fire again the kid scrambles to his feet, clutching his bruised shoulder, and staggers out the door as fast as his rubbery legs will take him. Pain, it would seem, is a great mind-clearer - and the Doctor throws a major-league fastball.

Unfortunately, that particular lightning pitch has also relieved him of the only item in his vicinity that even remotely resembled a weapon, and we all know it. Llwnw pushes my mouth into a truly hateful grin - I can feel my cheek muscles ache with the sheer unfamiliarity of it - and turns back to him in triumph.

'Such a sentimentalist, Doctor. I knew I could rely on you. Ever since I had the good fortune to ride your devious friend Turlough, your

weaknesses have been an open book to me. Did you really think anything you could do would take me by surprise?'

'Compassion is a strength, Llwnw,' says the Doctor quietly. 'And as a child of the Vuar, you of all people should know it. Have you really rejected your heritage so completely?'

I know what he's trying to do. It was my idea, after all, and at the time I really did think it made sense: that if the killer had a vulnerability, it must be his patriotism, his identification with his oppressed people.

Unfortunately, that brilliant notion, which the Doctor is so loyally expounding on my behalf, turned out to be founded on a false premise. I forgot that in war there are two kinds of soldiers: those who fight for duty and those who fight for pleasure - and Llwnw happens to be one of the latter.

'Try again, Time Lord,' says Llwnw. 'You, telling me not to give up on my stodgy, gutless race? Surely you of all people should appreciate my genius. We're pioneers, you and I. We don't answer to our society's rules.'

'Ours is a high and lonely destiny,' the Doctor says dryly. 'I've heard that before. Enough talk, Llwnw. Tell me what you want.'

The creature squeezes my face into an expression of feigned surprise. 'Why, don't you know? You, of course. Your mind, your body, your knowledge, your TARDIS. I want to see the universe.'

'Conquer the universe, you mean.' The pleasant voice goes flat. 'Not on your life.'

'Or hers?' Irresistibly, my right hand lifts again, but this time the gun turns in a different direction, the muzzle pushing into my breast. 'You don't want to see that happen, I'm sure. By now you know what I'm capable of .'

'Then you'd better be ready to move fast,' says the Doctor. 'Because I'm sure suicide isn't any higher on your "To-Do" list than it is on hers.'

I can't consciously allow myself to think it, but I know the Doctor's telling me something again, and he must have a good reason for it. If he's got a plan, though, I don't know what it is. Or at least I hope I don't know what it is, because I'm really not keen on playing sacrificial lamb.

'You wouldn't hurt her,' Llwnw assures him smugly. 'Even if you were armed. And you won't let me hurt her either. I can walk out of this room in her body and send her on a killing spree that makes the Nemesis murders look like a Sunday School picnic. And I will, unless you give me a reason to stop.'

The Doctor is silent a moment, his head bent. Then he looks up, his eyes searching mine - or perhaps just Llwnw's, in the vain hope of seeing some flicker of Jessica Reislander behind them. Whatever he sees, though, it doesn't seem to encourage him. His shoulders slump a little, and he puts a hand on the corner of the desk as though to steady himself.

'Very well,' he says.

I want to scream "No!" but so help me, I can't. My mind is overwhelmed with Llwnw's gloating exultation, my arm feels like it's on fire, and in that moment of despair I do something I haven't done for years: I start, silently but fervently, to pray.

Stop that, Llwnw tells me, but with my last measure of defiance, I refuse. This could get ugly, but the Doctor interrupts:

'Still, you'll have to understand that I can't give you complete access to my mind. There are secrets there that aren't mine to keep or give away. And if you try to touch them, I won't be answerable for what happens to you.'

He speaks lightly, but there is an underlying menace in the words, and even Llwnw seems taken aback.

'I'll take what I can get,' says the alien, in the silky voice I have already learned to hate, in spite of - or more likely because of - the fact that it's mine.

'All right, then.' The Doctor steps out from behind the desk, takes a deep breath, squares his shoulders.

'Oh, no. That's too far away. Come closer.'

The Doctor looks surprised - which tells me a third thing he wants me to know, even if I'm still not sure why. Still, he takes a couple of steps forward.

'Hold out your hands,' commands Llwnw. 'Both of them.'

'You already know I'm not armed.'

'Just do it!' snaps the creature, and the Doctor, blinking a little,

complies. His fingertips barely touch my forearms, forming a rough bridge.

Something shifts inside my head, nauseatingly, and a wet thread oozes out my left nostril and down my face, like a cold purple nosebleed. As before, the stream is thick and full of weird muscular lumps, and it hurts even worse coming out than it did going in, because it seems to be taking about ten times as long. But worst of all is the shame, knowing how disgusting it must look, especially to the Doctor who stands less than three feet away, watching the whole process.

I open my mouth, and for the first time in five minutes a sound that is not Llwnw's comes out of it - a little, shuddering sob of tearless but abject humiliation.

Up to this point the Doctor's expression has been that of a martyr, sad but resolute. Now it changes, and in the blue eyes I see a flash of anxiety and even a faint embarrassment, as though he's decided to do something he's not quite sure about. I only have a second to wonder what that is when he says in a peculiar breathless voice, 'I'll make it easier for you,' and his hands close around my forearms and, just like that, his mouth comes down over mine.

That probably sounds romantic. It isn't. For one thing, the whole time Llwnw is slithering out of my nose; and for another, I would hardly call it a kiss in the first place, it's so dispassionate. Kind, yes, and gentle, but restrained beyond belief: almost inhumanly polite. I'm prepared to accept that the Doctor might not find me desirable, and that he's merely trying to do me some sort of favour; but this goes beyond mere condescension into the realm of the utterly bizarre, like a man kissing an orange or somebody else's pet iguana. If I didn't understand before that the Doctor came from another planet, I realise it then.

At any rate, the kiss succeeds on one level at least: I'm shocked by the sheer unexpectedness of it. Llwnw is equally startled. We're connected now, all three of us. There's a flutter of recent memories, vague at first, then yielding to clarity and meaning: a tall blue box, a sceptical-looking woman, a young man with carroty hair. Another flash of thought startles me with the answer to a question I'd almost forgotten I'd asked.

It's nearly over now. I can feel Llwnw's eagerness conquer his exhaustion as he pushes the last of himself into a new and powerful mind. The pressure of the Doctor's lips against mine suddenly intensifies and for a moment it's almost like a real kiss except that at the same moment his left hand whips down to my wrist, yanks it sideways, and squeezes my finger against the trigger.

The force of the explosion rips us apart, the Doctor crumpling against the desk while I stagger back, the gun still smoking in my hand. Horror freezes me rigid as I watch the Doctor slide with agonising slowness over the corner of the desk to collapse on the office floor. I have never seen so much blood in my life.

With a wet squealing sound Llwnw bolts out of the Doctor's ear, congealing in a lumpy puddle on the carpet. Then the whole gelatinous mass solidifies and I find myself looking at a figure barely eight inches tall, squat and misshapen, like a child's Play-Doh statue of a dwarf. It staggers drunkenly toward me, gurgling words in a language I've never heard before and fervently hope never hear again. It grabs for my ankle--

With an incoherent sound of fury and despair, I shoot it. The gun kicks and roars again, and again, and again, until there are no bullets left, and my arm feels like it's going to come off at the shoulder. When I open my eyes, there's nothing left of Llwn but an inky blotch on the carpet.

I clench my left fist deliberately, calling on the pain to keep me from throwing up. It works, but only just. The Mennonite woman, who has not moved the entire time, starts to cry and babble in German, but I ignore her. I throw away the gun an drop to my knees on the sodden carpet, reaching for the Doctor.

His face is white, his mouth open and gasping. A heart shot, it has to be: I can't believe he's lived even this long. I press the heel of my hand against the wound, trying desperately to stanch the flow of thick, orange-red blood, but knowing all the while it's hopeless.

'No_ isn't.' The words are faint, but definite. 'Two hearts. Get... message. Turlough.'

The memories he gave me are still fresh in my mind, and I know

who Turlough is. But how on earth am I supposed to contact him in Washington, D.C.? I open my mouth to object, but the Doctor, weak as he is, anticipates me.

'E-mail. TARDIS.'

His dimensionally transcendental time-ship has an e-mail address. Of course it does. I'd laugh at the sheer glorious absurdity of the thing, only I'm too busy fighting back tears. The cleaning lady must have finally pulled herself together enough to get up and run, because I can't hear her sobbing any more, just my own.

The Doctor's wet hand folds over mine. 'Jessica. All... right. Just... message.'

One desperate, nearly hysterical minute later, I manage to find Netscape Mail on the office's computer. As the weak voice behind me croaks out instructions, I type the long e-mail address, forcing my sticky fingers to get every character right. The body of the message is even trickier, with a complex set of coordinates that seem to involve a good deal more than three dimensions. He makes me read it back to him, slowly, then nods with an effort when I ask if it's okay to send.

As far as I can tell, the message goes through. I slump back to the floor beside him and lift his head onto my lap, no longer crying, but the sharp edge of grief in my throat is somehow even worse. His eyes are closed again, his expression drawn but oddly peaceful, and I stroke his nice new haircut, the only decent thing I've given him since we met. If it hadn't been for me, I can't help thinking, none of this would have happened....

Then I frown, and the thought stops short. If it hadn't been for me, things would have happened differently. Maybe they'd have been better, but it's just as possible that they'd have been worse. As it is, the Doctor's not dead yet, and neither is the little girl or the punk kid or the Mennonite lady, or anybody else in the city except Janelle, whose death the Doctor seems to have laid on his own conscience. A lot of people have been scared and a couple of car owners are going to have spectacular insurance claims, plus I don't want to think about the bill for cleaning this office, but it's nothing that can't be fixed. And Llwnw won't be riding people like Clarence Mortensen or Muriel Harris, or me, any more.

'Good… girl,' breathes the Doctor.

Whether he's reading my thoughts or just a good guesser, I don't know, but I find those words oddly comforting.

I sit there for what seems like hours, with the Doctor's body getting colder and his whispered assurances fewer, until at the very end I'm sure he's dead and I'm sitting there only because I'm too frightened to move. Somebody's called the police and the sirens sound like they're almost at the door, and it occurs to me belatedly that they're going to think I'm responsible, if not for the whole crazy thing, at least for a significant part of it. After all, my fingerprints are all over the gun.

The gun. It's still lying there on the floor, and I can't bear to touch it. Not only because it's right in the middle of the wet patch that used to be Llwnw, but because it's the answer to a question I'm sorry I ever asked. If the Doctor had merely admitted in so many words that he never missed a shot, I'd have told him his attitude made no sense. But when it came from his mind - the wrenching ambivalence of that disclosure was more than enough to silence me forever.

The TARDIS arrives, with a wheeze and a thump, just as the police begin pounding up the stairs. We barely manage to dematerialise before they burst in. Even after that, things are pretty tense, and it's days before any of us are sure the Doctor will make it - but in the end, he comes back to life.

And so do I.

My name is Jessica Richardson. I have a degree in sociology and anthropology and another degree in criminal psychology, and I work as an advisor with the Vancouver police department. My hair, I am pleased to say, is a handsome shade of auburn that goes right down to the roots. All of which I owe to the Doctor, and although something in me knows I'll never see him again, I also know I'll never forget him.

The Doctor, on the other hand, is a busy Time Lord with an enormous store of memories and experiences, and a great many things on his mind. So, having looked after me and said goodbye to me, will he forget me?

Maybe.

But only until the next time he picks up a gun.

Magnificent Folly

Deborah T. Stevens

The TARDIS was at rest. The steady rise and fall of the rotor had stopped, provoking a 'humph' from the old man at the controls, satisfied with a trouble free arrival. The silence that now filled the room was shattered as the door to the Ship's interior opened to admit the old man's companions; a dark haired, petite featured teenage girl and a clean-cut, short haired young man.

'So, we've landed, eh?' questioned the man.

'Of course we have, Steven,' answered the girl. 'See, the rotor's stopped.'

'Thanks a lot, Dodo. Any idea where we are, Doctor? Or when?'

The old man looked at his two companions. They couldn't be more different – a schoolgirl from 1960s Earth and a fighter pilot from the 23rd Century – but the two had forged a common bond during their recent adventures.

'Doctor?'

'Hmmm?'

'Steven asked if you knew where we were.'

'Oh, yes.' He checked the console. 'The Ukraine, 1854. Interesting. I wonder...'

'What?' questioned Steven.

'Oh, nothing, m'boy. Just lost in thought.'

'Can we go out and look about?' asked Dodo.

'First off, I think a change of clothes is in order. You would cause quite a stir dressed like that should we meet anyone,' he said with a pointed look at her short skirt and close-fitting blouse. 'There should be something in the wardrobe that would suffice.' With a groan, Dodo turned back and headed for the inner corridors of the TARDIS. Steven laughed at her discomfort but stopped at a look from the Doctor. 'You'll need a change as well young man.'

'What's wrong with what I have on?' Steven looked down at his navy

trousers and white button-down shirt.

'Perhaps a uniform will not lead to so many questions.'

Steven puffed himself up at the thought of a uniform. 'An officer?'

'An unaccounted-for officer would cause too many problems. Though perhaps one more lieutenant among many might not be noticed.'

A few moments later, Steven joined the Doctor outside. The Doctor was always amazed at how a simple change of clothes could change how one was perceived. He smiled as Steven ran a finger along the inside of his collar as if to loosen it.

'C'mon, Dodo! We haven't got all day!'

'You don't have to walk in this thing!' Dodo walked out of the TARDIS wearing a pale blue dress with hoop petticoats. The Doctor made her carry a matching parasol for no lady would dare be caught in the sun without one. 'Well?'

'You truly look like a lady,' grinned Steven in awe. 'But can you talk like one?'

'I can be posh when I need to be.' She straightened to her full diminutive height and tried to look haughty and austere.

'Yeah, you're a duchess.'

'This just may be one of those instances, my dear. You look wonderful,' said the Doctor. 'Now I think we should be on our way.'

They trudged along the almost desert-like landscape. The Doctor found the walk invigorating even thought it was a little on the warm side. He stopped and looked back at the others. Steven had perspiration dripping down his face and his hair was slicked to his head. Dodo was reduced to taking tiny steps in her dainty slippers. After a brief rest, they continued on. They soon spotted the British encampment and made their way towards it. They were stopped by a sentry who pointed his rifle at them. When he saw the stripes on Steven's tunic, he lowered it and saluted. Steven returned the salute and let the Doctor explain their presence.

'Is your commander about?'

'Yes, sir, but he's busy with the generals, what, with the Russians so close and all.'

'Yes, of course. I am here as an observer and this is my ward, Dorothea. Sgt. Taylor was assigned to escort us.'

'Well, I guess it couldn't hurt for him to know you're here.' The sentry gave them directions to the commander's tent.

On the way, Dodo confronted him. 'You landed us in the middle of a war, Doctor!'

'There are wars happening all the time on this planet of yours. Odds are we'd find one sooner or later,' he said in his defence.

They entered the commandeered house and faced the group of officers in scarlet and gold. In his mind, the Doctor identified them one by one. Major-General Sir George Brown, who had spent most of his military career in administration, was in charge of the Light Division. The Duke of Cambridge, cousin to the Queen, headed the First Division. Sir George de Lacy Evans, who had a brilliant record in the Peninsular, American, and Waterloo campaigns, commanded the Second Division. Sir Richard England led the Third Division. Sir George Cathcart commanded the Fourth Division. One, older and balding, turned to face them. The first thing that struck the Doctor was the fact that his right arm was missing. 'I am Lord Raglan. What are you doing in the middle of a war zone?' The Doctor gave Lord Raglan the same explanation he used on the sentry. 'Wonderful, another observer.' Raglan shook his head. 'Very well, but stay out of the way and do not tell me how to run my army.'

'I wouldn't dare do such a thing. I am an observer, not an advisor.'

Raglan turned to Steven who saluted and stood at attention 'And where do you fit in, lieutenant?'

'Escort, sir. I was charged to safely deliver them.'

'I'm giving you new orders. Watch over them and see that they come to no harm.'

'Yes, sir!'

There was a loud boom of cannon and Dodo gripped the Doctor's arm. 'Welcome to the Crimea,' said Raglan.

'Yes, well, these must be expected when so close to the front lines, hmm? Have there been any hits from Russian artillery?'

'A few minor annoyances. Nothing too disastrous.' Raglan looked about the tent and spotted one of his aides. 'Nolan, arrange some

accommodations for our guests.'

'Sir.' Nolan saluted and showed the travellers to a mid-size tent toward the opposite end of the camp. 'Will this be satisfactory, Doctor?'

Inside were two camp beds, each with a trunk at its foot. 'It is more than I expected.'

Nolan immediately set about gathering a few things into a pack. 'Is this your tent, Captain?' asked Dodo. 'We didn't mean to put you out.'

'That's all right, miss. Everyone thinks the Russians will attack soon and I need to be closer to the general.'

'And your tent-mate?' questioned the Doctor.

'He doesn't have to worry about where to sleep anymore.' Nolan checked that he had all he needed. 'Lieutenant, let me show you to where you'll be sleeping.'

Steven looked at the Doctor. They needed to talk about a few things. Quite a few things. As a lieutenant, however, he knew he couldn't speak to a captain without expecting some repercussions. 'One moment, Captain,' said the Doctor. 'I think the three of us need to discuss a few things. Does this pose any problems?'

'No, sir, of course not' He turned to Steven. 'I'll wait for you outside Lord Raglan's headquarters.' The young captain left.

Once they were alone, Steven glared at the Doctor. 'The Crimean War? Gee, Doctor, how do you manage to take us to all the hot spots?'

'It isn't that much of a surprise—'

'You knew when we landed, didn't you? And yet you treated it like a walk in the park!'

'Steven, your voice,' Dodo cautioned. 'They'll hear you.'

Steven took a deep breath. 'Well?' he asked the Doctor.

'Judging by our location and the year, yes, I knew. And you would have too if you knew your own planet's history.'

'How far into the war are we?' asked Dodo. 'What can we expect?'

The Doctor walked over to the tent flap and peered outside. Towards the west he could see a walled city with forts and bastions. He then looked up at the sky as if the gauge the weather. 'Fall, perhaps October.'

'How can you tell?'

'The weather, firstly. The air has that touch of autumn. Also, there is still a siege of Sebastopol.' He closed the flap as it began to rain. 'From what I noticed during our walk, we are on the Chersonese Plateau near Balaklava.' He looked expectantly at his two companions for any glimmer of recognition. When nothing was forthcoming he sighed. 'From Taylor I expected this, but you, my dear, you were still in school. Surely they taught you something regarding history.'

Dodo shook her head. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. I was never one for history.'

'"Half a league, half a league, Half a league onwards All in the valley of Death rode the six hundred."' Steven grinned and looked at the Doctor. 'I, on the other hand, loved to study military history. It just took me a minute.'

'Yes, well, now we must figure out what to do.'

'Warn them, of course,' exclaimed Dodo.

'That's the one thing we must not do,' declared the Doctor. 'The one thing we cannot do. We mustn't change history, not one little thing. It could have dire consequences and change your world, perhaps many others that arose from Earth colonies.'

'But—'

'The Doctor's right, Dodo. On my first trip we met a man who wanted to give King Harold modern weapons so he could defeat the Vikings and William the Conqueror.'

'We must do what we can without letting on what we know. One wrong word could mean catastrophe.'

Steven took a deep breath. 'That's going to be a hard thing to do, Doctor, knowing that so many are going to die.'

'Remember Troy and Paris. There was nothing we could do in either situation.' He sighed. 'Now you had better go find Captain Nolan and get yourself a tent before you end up sleeping in the rain.'

Steven smiled ruefully and headed out into the rain. 'What do we do now?' asked Dodo.

'Why don't you get some sleep while I try to think of something.'

Steven found Nolan at Raglan's house. 'Is everything all right?' he

asked.

'As well as can be,' Steven answered, wiping the rain out of his face. 'The Doctor just wanted me to meet them in the morning.'

'If the Russians don't attack first,' said Nolan as they walked through the camp in the rain.

'You really think they'll attack tomorrow?'

'It's been expected for some time, and engineers in the forward trenches heard Russian bands playing from somewhere near the river.'

'You'd think they'd want to be quiet about their position.'

'But they have a whole different approach, don't they? That's not all. One of the Pasha's spies reported that an attack was imminent, probably from Baidar to the east.'

'Has anyone acted on this?'

'Lord Raglan refuses to use spies. It's not honourable.'

'But surely the information is proven true. I would think that anything that would save a large amount of lives would be worth it.'

'Raglan is one of the old school where honour is everything. It will make things interesting, that's all I can say. I wonder how any of them survived in the army this long.' He soon realised he was talking to an enlisted man. 'Not a word of this, lieutenant.'

'No, sir. I wouldn't dare.' Steven was quiet as he followed Nolan. If this was how the officers, men who were in the know, felt, maybe there was something going on here. Something else to tell the Doctor. Then again, maybe he already knew.

They stopped outside a larger tent and Nolan held open the flap for him. 'You'll be sharing with William Russell, reporter for The Times, and a few others. It was the best I could do on such short notice. There should be more openings tomorrow.'

'Where's Mr. Russell now?' asked Steven.

'Probably at the cavalry camp getting some information for his reports.'

Steven looked at the captain and could see he still felt a little nervous about what he had revealed earlier. He saluted. 'Thank you for your assistance, sir.'

Back on the correct military footing, Nolan returned the salute. 'Very good, lieutenant. Carry on.' He left.

Steven tightened the flap against the rain and wind before biting onto one of the beds with a sigh. 'Here we are with an army of Russians between us and the TARDIS with an 'imminent attack' possible in the morning. Thank you, Doctor.'

If someone had walked into the Doctor's tent, they would have thought him asleep. For all outward appearances, that was as it seemed, however, the Doctor's mind was searching every possible avenue for a safe way out of their situation. He knew the attack would begin a little after sunrise when the Russians approached from the east. He heard Dodo's deep and easy breathing and wished he had that ability to put his problems behind him, even for a short time. He hoped Steven was sleeping soundly as well.

He rose early, an hour or so before dawn, and walked out to face the morning. The cold and damp passed through him and he shuddered before his body adjusted. A few fires sputtered weakly as the sodden wood struggled to do its job. He saw a few sentries as the sky began to lighten. He looked at his watch. Lord Lucan was just starting out on his morning inspection, a ride it would end abruptly.

He turned back inside the tent and quietly roused Dodo. 'Come, my child, things will be picking up soon. We must be ready.'

Dodo sat up on the bed and rubbed her eyes. 'Are we going to leave, then?'

They think I am an observer and what would be the point of leaving before observing the battle? No, we must follow through on everything. I promise you we will leave at the first opportune moment.'

'And what of Steven? Do you think they'll make him fight?'

'I strongly doubt that. He was 'assigned' to us by Lord Raglan himself. Now, hurry.'

As if to emphasise the Doctor's words, cannon sounded in the distance. Dodo hopped up from the bed and fumbled with her petticoats. Assured they were on properly, she slipped on her shoes and automatically ran a hand through her hair. The Doctor waited with reined impatience.

When she was done, they headed for Raglan's tent on the premise of a morning constitutional. Not long after dawn, a rider galloped into

camp. The Doctor glanced at his watch. 'Hmm, just as I thought.'

At that moment, the camp burst into activity. Every soldier was awake and checking his weapon and pack. Steven, hair tousled and tunic unbuttoned, came running up to them. 'I take it it's started.'

The Doctor pulled him aside. 'The Russians have begun their attack on the redoubts with cannon cover from Kamara. The first will fall in less than an hour.' He could see that Steven was taking his forced inactivity hard. He took Dodo by the arm. 'We must take up our own positions.'

The Sapouné Ridge at the edge of the Chersonese Plateau afforded an ideal view of the plain below. The Doctor led his two companions to an area where they could see the battle unfold. With the low-lying mist obscuring most of what lay below, all they could see was the fire from the muzzles of the cannon as they shelled the redoubts. The Doctor took his telescope from his inside coat pocket, opened it, and aimed it at the valley.

From their vantage point, they could see the Russians as they overran the first redoubt and the Turks as they fled.

'Why aren't they doing anything?' demanded Dodo.

'Ah, but they are.' Some of the cavalry had finally set off to help the Turks by running interference as they ran for cover. The Doctor could see the determination on the soldiers' faces as well as the wide-eyed fear of the horses. Dodo tapped his arm to borrow the telescope and he passed it to her.

'Ah, lieutenant, this is where you got to.'

The Doctor watched as Steven greeted the bearded portly newcomer as if greeting an old friend. 'Mr. Russell! You were still asleep when I left and I didn't want to disturb you.'

'Nonsense. I'm here to write about this and it wouldn't do for me to sleep through it all.'

The Doctor 'harrumphed' and Steven immediately made the introductions. 'Mr William Russell, reporter for the Times, this is Dr Watson and his ward Dorothea Chaplet. I was appointed their escort for the journey here.'

The Doctor bowed his head in greeting while Dodo dropped a polite curtsey. 'An honour, sir. I have read some of your work.'

'Why, thank you, sir. Sgt. Taylor has told me of some of the things that occurred during your voyage.'

The Doctor looked pointedly at Steven. 'There wasn't much else to do inside a tent while it was raining,' declared Steven.

'It was a journey with the usual hazards, nothing troublesome.'

'You were lucky enough to avoid the cholera. That is enough to make any expedition successful,' commented Russell.

'Doctor,' called Dodo, 'we have some movement.' She handed over the telescope. 'Three more redoubts have fallen.'

Steven and Russell peered through the mist as the Doctor saw for himself. 'It seems they saw the Russians' approach and didn't like the odds. However, it seems that the Light Brigade is preparing to make a stand. They are about even with the second redoubt.'

'Commanding view, is it not?' They all turned to see that Lord Raglan and his aides had arrived to view the battle.

'Ideal for a commanding officer, my lord,' answered the Doctor. 'One that allows you to place your men as if on a board.'

'Are you comparing this battle to a game, Doctor?'

'One of strategy and risk,' remarked the Doctor to calm ruffled feathers. 'Only a strong tactician and a man knowledgeable in the ways of war could win.'

The mist cleared and all could see the valley below them and the sun glinting off the swords and bayonets. They could also see the water beyond Balaklava and the red of the Highlanders standing in defence of it.

Steven turned his gaze to the north valley and saw the Russians – cavalry, artillery, and infantry – advancing. 'I think someone might need to take a look at this.'

A number of telescopes were turned in that direction. 'Looks as if they're headed for Balaklava,' commented the Doctor.

'Could be,' agreed Russell. 'That is where the supplies are, and the weakest defence.'

The Doctor noticed that Captain Nolan was highly agitated regarding the inaction of the cavalry below. He knew Raglan was worried at this new development as they had been expecting the main attack towards Sebastopol. 'Hardinge!' he called.

A captain rode up to him and saluted. 'Sir?'

'You are to tell Lucan to have eight squadrons of the Heavies support Campbell and the Turks and to guard Kadikoi and the cavalry camp.'

'Sir.' Hardinge saluted and rode off.

'Will that work, sir?' questioned Dodo, not wanting to seem unintelligent in these matters.

'It will have to.' Raglan watched as Hardinge rode down the slope and soon saw the squadrons placed as requested.

The Russians then moved towards Kadikoi to face the Highlanders that now commanded the rise that blocked the way to Balaklava. 'He must be in his element,' Raglan murmured.

'Who, sir?' questioned Steven.

'Campbell. Always at his best when there's action.'

The observers watched as the Russians approached the hill, thinking it unoccupied. The Highlanders then rose and crested the hill, firing at the surprised Russians. They recovered and advanced again, only to be met with another round of fire. A third volley was fired and the Russians broke and turned back to Canrobert's Hill.

'Magnificent!' declared Russell as he jotted in his notebook. 'An unwavering line of red.'

Steven and the Doctor exchanged knowing glances.

Dodo had kept her eyes on the Heavy Brigade as they made their way slowly to help the Highlanders. A second division of Russian cavalry rose over the Causeway Heights and looked down on the British, less than half a mile away. The Russians watched in astonishment as the British wheeled about in parade pound fashion.

Raglan soon turned his attention to the Heavies. 'What does Scarlett think he's doing? Why doesn't he charge?' he muttered.

Soon they heard the trumpet sound the charge. In moments, the Russian grey swallowed the red of the British as the two cavalries clashed. Dragoons then attacked the Russian flank and centre. The Light Calvary, however, stayed where they were, less than 500 yards away.

'It looks as if Lucan and Cardigan had another “tiff”,' Nolan whispered to Steven. 'They hate each other.'

'Yet they placed Cardigan under Lucan's command?'

'Makes you wonder about the military mind, eh?'

'It looks as if the Russians are regrouping, sir,' said one of Raglan's aides.

Raglan looked out over the plain and saw the aide was right. They seemed to be bringing up more infantry with the intent to take away his guns. Something needed to be done. He sent the order to Lucan to prepare the cavalry for a combined attack on the Causeway.

As they waited, the Doctor turned to Dodo. 'Well, my dear, what do

you think?'

'I can honestly say I've never seen anything like it. I imagine it will last me for the rest of my life.'

'It is true that not many young women of your station witness war this close. If it were my decision,' he said with a pointed look at the Doctor, 'you would have come no further than Constantinople.'

'But she is my ward and under my constant supervision.' Steven laughed at this comment and quickly turned it to a cough.

'But women can contribute almost as much as men,' began Dodo. 'Maybe not in the field itself, but what about reporting, as Mr Russell does, or even nursing. We shouldn't be shunned or sheltered because we are female.'

'A delightful speech, miss, but hardly new.' Dodo opened her mouth to argue but Raglan immediately turned to the battle. 'What is Lucan doing?' He looked at the French officers who were there watching as well and didn't want them to think he couldn't control his officers. 'Nolan!' The captain rushed over and saluted. 'I want you to tell Lucan that he is to attack to prevent the loss of the guns on the Causeway.'

'Sir!' Nolan saluted and glanced at Steven as he went past, a glance that said 'about time'.

While the others were watching Nolan's tricky descent down the slopes, Steven went over to the Doctor. 'This is where it happened, isn't it? Lucan misinterpreted the orders and told Cardigan to go for the Russian guns in the North Valley instead of the guns of the redoubts.'

'Yes. As you know, Nolan didn't care for either of the men so he made no effort to clarify. Perhaps it was Nolan's own need to see action that made him act the way he did.'

'Why didn't Cardigan refuse?' asked Dodo.

'You can't refuse the orders of a superior officer,' said Steven. 'Tantamount to treason.'

'Even suicidal ones?'

'For the most part, if the orders are suicidal, it usually follows that the officer is too. He wouldn't exactly listen to reason.'

'Steven is right, Dodo. For the most part, in the heat of battle, words get turned around and there is much miscommunication. It is not always the commanding officer's fault, though Lord Lucan will be

brought before the House of Commons to defend his actions. What are you doing, young man?' This was directed at Steven.

'I can't sit idly by!' he called as he grabbed the reins of a horse and quickly mounted it. 'I know what you've said, but I still have to try.'

Steven gripped the horse with his legs and held the reins as he followed Nolan's path down the tricky slope. He barely kept his seat in the saddle and prayed the horse didn't break his leg on the way down. When he reached the bottom, he took a brief breath and galloped towards Lucan and the Light Brigade. He spotted Lucan returning and called out to him. 'My lord! Lord Lucan!'

Lucan stopped at looked at Steven as if he were some insignificant bug. 'Yes?'

Steven saluted. 'I'm sorry, sir, but Lord Raglan wishes to confirm that you are aware that you are to retake the redoubts and keep the Russians from taking the guns.'

'Those are the guns he wants? Nolan intimated that it was the guns in the North Valley.' He wheeled around to attempt to stop Cardigan, but the Light Brigade had begun the charge.

Steven saw Nolan leave his place and ride forward. He must have realized that they were going the wrong way. Cardigan didn't seem to pay attention as the brigade kept going. A shell exploded and Nolan shuddered and Steven knew he was hit. Like the cavalryman he was, Nolan stayed in the saddle until the end.

Lucan halted and Steven did the same. 'There's nothing we can do now, lieutenant. Let's hope my demmed brother-in-law can make something out of this.'

Steven watched from a safe distance as the Light Brigade continued on its suicide mission. '*"Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do or die"*,' he murmured.

Lucan pulled out his telescope and watched. 'The first line are practically all gone,' he commented to Steven. 'The second and third line have suffered heavily but have managed to make it to the Russian artillery. Demm, there's too much smoke from the cannon. I can't tell what's happening.'

'Perhaps it's for the best, sir. What you don't know...'

'Could ruin my career.' He turned his telescope back to the valley. 'I should have realised Raglan wouldn't make such an order. A mile and a half straight into twelve cannon with added infantry and guns on their flanks. I don't bloody believe it!'

'What is it, m'lord?'

'Cardigan has survived, the blighter. They're on the way back now.'

'Splendid news, sir.' Steven turned his horse around. 'I'll go back to Lord Raglan and hopefully explain what happened.'

'It would be appreciated, lieutenant, but I don't think it would do much good.'

With a salute, Steven headed back to the plateau and tried to think of what the Doctor would say.

'What were you thinking, young man?' the Doctor exclaimed once the three were able to make their way back to the TARDIS. 'You could have been killed!'

'I know, Doctor, but I just had to try. Nothing happened anyway. Nolan tried to correct his mistake and was killed, so maybe you were right, maybe it was meant to be.'

'I have told you many times, m'boy, so why won't you listen? I'm not just saying this for my health, you know.'

'I realise that. I do have a question though. How come at times you say it is possible for history to be 'ruined' yet at other times, it's as if there's no other way?'

The Doctor thought, trying to come up with the best possible metaphor. 'Picture time as a river—'

'If you put a rock in it, a boulder, it diverts the stream, changing history,' put in Dodo.

'Yes, my dear, but it depends on where in the river you place your boulder.'

'I don't understand,' said Dodo.

'I don't either.'

The Doctor sighed and stopped walking. 'If you place your rock at the beginning of the river, where it is still rather weak, it is easily diverted. However, if you attempt to place a rock further downstream where it is flowing strong, the river will wash right over the boulder as if

it had never been there.'

'Ah, I see now,' said Steven. 'Everything had already been set in motion, gathering momentum, and nothing would have stopped it.'

'Exactly.' They continued walking. 'I never want you to do something as foolhardy again.'

'Yes, sir,' said Steven, saluting the Doctor's back.

Dodo laughed. 'Look! There it is.' They looked at the blue police box standing like a lone monolith on the plain. 'I can't wait to get out of this gear.'

'I could do with a shower and a fresh change of clothes myself,' commented Steven as he looked down at his blood and mud spattered tunic. 'Too bad I can't do the same to my memory. All those men slaughtered due to miscommunication.'

'It wasn't the first and it definitely would not be the last,' said the Doctor. 'You should keep these memories and treasure them even though they aren't the most pleasant.'

'Treasure them?' questioned Dodo. 'Why?'

'To keep their memories alive,' said Steven with realisation. 'So they didn't die in vain. Right?' He looked to the Doctor.

'That, and the fact that you can hope to avoid the repetition of such an act. I have seen many such battles and it aches me to know I can do nothing to prevent it. As my friend, George Santayana once said, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it”, or some such.'

'But all those lives? How could they forget?'

'It becomes history, my dear, something in a textbook. The realities of death and destruction give way to the glory of war; soldiers wishing to die for crown and country.'

The three continued on to the TARDIS, each in their own thoughts regarding what they had just seen and of the future wars that extended through centuries of mankind's existence. Underlying this was the hope that the next destination would be somewhere peaceful and relaxing.

The Art of Compassion

Alan Taylor

The Moon, 2045

Love hurts.

This is what I tell myself every time I lift a scalpel, every time I gently caress a muscle before an injection, every time I wipe away an invisible tear as one of my lovers dies.

And every time it hurts, it hurts just as much as the first time, just as much as when I was a girl.

'Ooh, a corridor.'

I had seen many corridors in my time and many monsters running down them. Usually directly towards me.

'Are you sure?'

Of course I was sure. Long thin room, grey metal walls. Corridor. The Doctor was still in the console room, presumably still tinkering with things. I'd just barged out of the police box, brashly as anything, expecting to find myself in Saigon in 2000 – just like the Doctor promised. Really I should have known better by this point in my travels.

'Well,' I shouted back to him, 'it might be the Victoria and Albert, but only if they've redecorated.' Looking around, I spotted a security camera. I waved.

'Nonsense, Sarah Jane. The Victoria and Albert never looked this functional. Definitely a corridor.' He had snuck up behind me, and he'd managed to find a deerstalker hat from somewhere. Very Sherlock Holmes but it really didn't go with the ruffled shirt. I screwed up my nose and stuck my tongue out at him, but he just grinned.

'Come along,' he continued. 'Let's have a look around.'

'Oh yes,' I said with mock enthusiasm. 'Let's look around until somebody comes and arrests us.'

That's the thing about corridors – or at least the sort of corridors I seemed to spend my time in. There were two basic types. Grey

corridors with monsters and grey corridors with security guards. No grey corridors with beautiful art on the walls, no grey corridors with twittering birds (unless you count twittering birds that then changed into monsters.)

Nope, corridors were bad. So it really made sense to get back into the TARDIS, and vamoose off to Saigon, as planned. I said as much, as I struggled to keep up with the Doctor's longer strides.

'I don't think we can leave here very easily, Sarah Jane,' he said. 'You see, the co-ordinates were correct. Something drew us off course. So we need to find out what it is and shut it down before we can leave, otherwise we'll just end up back here again.'

'Oh.' I paused. 'So it's like the City of the Exxilons?'

'In a way, Sarah Jane, it is.'

'And you're not just making up excuses because you like to explore strange new corridors?'

He turned and grinned at me – that infuriating grin that was as disconcerting as it was charming. He was about to say something, but his jaw dropped, and he looked over my shoulder at something or someone. Presumably a security guard or a monster. I inched my head round and found myself staring straight down the barrel of a gun.

All in all, it had been one of those mornings.

Le Huy is sweating. I wipe his forehead, kiss him on the brow. I really want him to survive this; I have always been fond of him.

He is strapped to the operating table, naked from the waist up. He doesn't pull against the restraints, but just lies there, his fear tangible, as he flicks his eyes from my face to the scalpel in my hand, and back again.

I really want to use anaesthetic, but I have already ascertained that it interferes with the process. I close my eyes and pray silently before I make the incision, before I hear his scream.

Later, when the implant is complete, I wake him with another kiss.

We weren't in Vietnam, we were in a penal colony on the moon. We weren't in 2001, we were in 2045. We weren't in a corridor any more, we were in a holding cell. I wasn't sulking, I was contemplating. The

Doctor wasn't helping, he was pacing.

'You know, Sarah Jane,' he said eventually. 'You'd love Ho Chi Minh City in May. The trees are blossoming, and just walking down Le Duan Boulevard makes you happy to be alive.'

'Ho Chi Minh City being...?'

'They renamed Saigon after Vietnamese reunification. It's really a beautiful city.'

He had told me this before. He had promised to show me that beautiful things can emerge from the ashes of war. All I had ever seen of Vietnam was the news footage in the seventies, and an episode of South Park that I found deep in the TARDIS vaults once. And that seemed to be mainly about frogs.

Mercifully, we weren't kept waiting there for long. The Doctor's incessant banging on the walls seemed to get someone's attention, and a pair of security guards – prison guards, I corrected myself – threw open the door and snarled that we were to be taken to the bitch.

'Really,' said the Doctor. 'There's no call for that sort of language.'

Two hours after the operation, and Le Huy is still alive. He seems disoriented, and he looks at me now with distrust rather than the worship that used to fill his gaze. I leave him strapped to the table for now. It's for his own safety.

For now, I have to give my attention to a minor security breach. A couple of intruders, no point of entry obvious. Two guards bring them to me. A man and a woman; she is of no consequence and I ignore her. He has a spark of intelligence, but more than that – I recognise something in his manner, something terrible and familiar.

I step away from Le Huy and towards them.

We were almost thrown into the warden's office. It was a similar grey to the prison cell, with a curtained off area at the far end, and a large camphor-wood desk. Warden Thi Phuong Bich, I read. Hence 'the bitch'. Imaginative.

I was surprised by the prison warden. First, there was the fact that she was a woman, and secondly, she was extraordinarily beautiful. A short, slim woman in her fifties; Asian, but with very pale skin. Her dark

hair was shoulder-length, and she wore a long dress in a plain blue fabric that emphasised her figure.

She looked, at me – why she looked at me rather than the Doctor, I have no idea – and almost looked through me, as though she was reaching into my soul.

'What are you doing here?' she said.

The Doctor answered her – he began with 'My Dear Lady,' which is always a danger sign – and I tried to see what was going on in the back of the room. It looked like maybe a rest area; I thought I could make out a bed in there. I strained my eyes, leaning forward.

The warden didn't seem to notice, so I risked a step forward – and then a second.

I looked at the Doctor, and caught his eye. He was in the middle of complimenting the warden on what a rigorous security regime she was imposing, but nodded – almost imperceptibly. Two more steps, and I pulled aside the curtain and entered the area at the back of the room.

The man calls himself 'The Doctor' with casual arrogance. He tries to charm me, as I try to work out what it is I recognise in him. Stupidly, I ignore the girl, who makes her way to the operating area at the back of the office. I suggest to the Doctor that we join her, and the small pistol I carry in my belt proves remarkably persuasive in this regard.

The girl has stopped just beyond the curtain, and I feel her stiffen when I place my hand on her shoulder. She gulps, and I feel a moment of satisfaction.

Le Huy looks at me as I enter – and then past me. His eyes meet the Doctor's and there is a moment of recognition.

And then it happens. Slowly, and with grace, he unfolds like a flower.

Frankly, it was horrible. That poor man, lying there. One minute he was looking at me, with fear in his eyes, a pleading look. Suddenly, he was everywhere. And I mean everywhere. I could feel him outside me, could feel him inside me. And I could feel the Doctor, and the warden too. There beside me. There was something new about the feeling, yet something strangely familiar. I turned my head to look towards the

Doctor, seeking a familiar shape. As I turned, the world blurred around me, and I found myself back in the TARDIS, the Doctor beside me.

'What was that?' I asked. He didn't know the answer, or if he did, he never said. I didn't find out myself until twenty-five years later, and even then it made no sense.

Ho Chi Minh City, May 2000

Le Huy died on the streets of Saigon, twenty years before he was born. He survived long enough to spew me out on to the streets. I don't know what happened to the Doctor and his woman – I felt them with me part of the way, but then I lost their presence. It doesn't matter.

Suddenly, I see the world with a new clarity. I come here to regain my innocence, and not for vengeance. I know where to go, and I know what to do.

I thought it was ironic that when I finally made it to Ho Chi Minh City it was in the year that the Doctor had originally intended to take me, but I flew business class and made no sudden detours to the moon.

He was right, of course. Ho Chi Minh City was lovely in the late spring, and as I sat beside a leafy boulevard sipping my iced tea, I could think of few places in the world that I would rather be.

There had been some brouhaha to do with some American diplomat being very undiplomatic, but that seemed to blow over in a few days. After all the fuss surrounding the anniversary of reunification I had decided to stay on for a few days and enjoy the bustling life of the city.

I recognised Phuong Bich as soon as I saw her, striding along the road. Her hair was ruffled, but other than that she was still the same woman, no older or younger, still in the same dress. Nobody batted an eyelid, but I left a few thousand Dong on the table and followed her, relatively stealthily.

I am followed along the Le Duan Boulevard. A Caucasian woman, and of no consequence. Time is short now, and I must take whatever action is needed. I can have no distractions.

I have no real plan, though. I just know that all I need to do is to distract myself for one moment, and then, when I turn into that lane, it will be empty and I will never know that terrible beauty that scars me still inside.

I can have no distractions.

I was pretty sure that she didn't recognise me, as I followed her through the streets. We were heading towards the Opera House and the Post Office, but I didn't recognise the streets. Once I thought she'd lost me in a mess of motorcycles, but she seemed more worried about where she was going than the fact that I was following her.

A nagging feeling grew within me. She was clearly up to no good – and it was probably up to me to stop her. I called her name, and she hesitated, but ignored me and carried on. I started running.

Realisation dawns. It is the Doctor's woman. Older, but still her. It doesn't matter. I can see myself ahead. I am five years old, carrying a stack of conical hats to sell to the tourist woman for American Dollars. Around the corner is the scary lady. I am aware of the Doctor's woman behind me, closing on me. I want to run, I want to cry out, but I am tired – so tired – and my voice fails me. I croak out something, but I do not hear, or do not choose to hear.

There is a hand on my shoulder, and I am pulled around. She looks angry, I notice with detachment.

I didn't mean to punch her. It just happened. She fell into the gutter, her nose bleeding. I started to say something, to reach down to help her up, but I was beaten to it. A woman in combat fatigues, with auburn hair. I couldn't make out her face, but I heard him apologising to Phuong Bich. And then, they were both gone.

Suddenly.

There was something familiar about this, but I couldn't place it. I decided to ask the Doctor, the next time he showed up in my life, and made my way back to the hotel for a mango juice and some spring rolls.

I'm back inside her. Back where it all began, back where it all begins. The ugly black thing still protrudes from her. I remember trying, back when I was five, trying to pull it free, and only succeeding in breaking off a part. I remember the pain it caused her, and the fact that I thought I was going to die.

How are you? I ask.

Much better, she replies. I am coming to terms with the agony, although it still hurts that I can't remove it.

I think I know what you mean, I say. I pause. I have done bad things, I continue. I have hurt people, just trying to create someone – something like you.

It would never have worked.

But it did – once. I came back. I thought I could change everything, make everything better.

And I feel her warmth, and her pity, and she wraps herself around me.

Together we travel, to somewhere new and random.

Outside Forces

GREG McELHA1TON

Compassion scrunched up her face like she'd been smacked in the face. 'It's hot,' she said, half-stepping back into the TARDIS.

The Doctor narrowly avoided stumbling into his retreating companion, twisting around her form blocking the doors. He looked at her outfit, noting the dark blue pants, white shirt and red pullover. 'I'd laid out a more appropriate outfit for you,' he said accusingly. 'Something a bit lighter,' the Doctor smiled. 'Less conspicuous.'

Compassion snorted. 'You're one to talk,' she said. She slowly stepped back out of the door and turned around. 'I thought you said this was Earth.'

The Doctor looked at their surroundings as well--a black, obsidian-esque stretch of land that went as far as the eye could see in one direction, and to the ocean in the other--and grinned. 'Not all of Earth is like England,' he said, 'charming as it may be. No, we're halfway around the planet, on some of the world's newest land.'

Compassion simply stared at him.

The Doctor sighed. 'Not even a guess?' he half-pleaded.

Compassion subconsciously reached up to her ever-present earpiece. She could feel a tickle of information in the back of her skull. Halfway around the world from the British Isles. Pacific Ocean. Humidity. Water. New land. There were still several options, she decided, but one stood out among them. 'Hawaii,' she finally said, stating it as fact.

'That's right!' he said, ushering Compassion forwards in the direction of the coastline. 'On the "Big Island" itself,' he added. Pointing off to his left, he directed Compassion's gaze to a faint plume of smoke in the distance. 'Lava flow,' he said. 'As it pours out of Mauna Loa--'

'--it hits the water, solidifies, and creates new land,' Compassion finished. 'Obviously.'

'Er, yes,' the Doctor said. He sounded a little deflated, and stuck his

hands into his jacket pockets as they continued to walk. Compassion suspected he wasn't used to having his soliloquies clipped short. He needs someone around to be orated to, she decided. Someone to listen with awe and smile prettily.

'Where's Fitz?' Compassion asked.

'Oh,' the Doctor said, waving his hands in the air. 'Why he wants to learn graphology, I have no idea. Still, once we pick him up he'll be just fine. Probably off romancing some poor Victorian girl.'

Compassion rolled her eyes. 'No doubt some poor orphan.'

'Yes, yes,' the Doctor agreed. 'Some screaming, orphaned Victorian girl.'

The two walked along the hardened lava ridge for a minute, the only noise the crashing surf.

Compassion turned to the Doctor. 'When are--'

The Doctor stopped dead in his tracks, his face pale. 'Oh no,' he gasped. 'That poor girl.' For a split second, he seemed on the verge of heading back to the TARDIS. Then he shrugged his shoulders and beamed at Compassion. 'They'll keep.' The two trudged on for another minute before he fmally turned back to his companion. 'I'm sorry, what were you asking?'

'When are we?' Compassion calmly asked.

The Doctor fumbled in his pockets for a minute before pulling out a silver fob watch. Flipping it open, he stared at it intently. 'It appears,' he murmured, 'early.' He stared at it for another second before snapping it shut. 'Yes, definitely early.

'Mind you,' he added, 'I was also aiming for Oahu. That's where they'll be landing.'

Oahu, the little voice in the back of Compassion's head noted, is the second largest island in the Hawaiian Islands. Location of both Hawaii's capital (Honolulu) and, for most of its existence after being absorbed into the United States, most of the population of Hawaii. The number of landings, however, wasn't so cut and dried. Native Hawaiian tribes? Captain Cook? The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor? The aborted Lulqrlu invasion? For a split second, Compassion felt the need to ask just who was landing.

Stop that, she said to the voice in the back of her head. Instead she continued to walk. After all, if there was one thing she'd learned...

'The alien invasion, of course,' the Doctor said. 'The latest in a very long, proud tradition.'

...it was that the Doctor was incapable of keeping his mouth shut.

They'd walked for about an hour and a half before they finally came upon other people. 'As you can see,' the guide was saying to a dozen tourists, 'this is where the road was enveloped by the lava. She pointed down to where black asphalt was covered by black lava. 'We'll be moving on in about ten minutes, for those who want to walk out a little further and take pictures.'

'Excellent,' the Doctor whispered. 'Follow my lead.' The Doctor bounded over to the tour guide, who had already gone over to the National Park Services booth and was guzzling a bottle of water.

'Forgive me, dear madam,' he said breathlessly, but do you think we might be able to catch a ride with you into Hilo? Preferably the airport, if that s where you're going?'

The guide's eyes flicked up and down the pair. 'What're you two supposed to be?' she finally asked.

'Our vehicle broke down and we really need to get back to Oahu,' the Doctor breezed along. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'My friend here has a date she can't miss.'

The guide's face softened a bit as she studied Compassion's freckled face and pudgy build. Compassion couldn't help but notice that the guide's body looked remarkably similar to hers. *Very clever, Doctor,* she thought. Meanwhile, the guide was looking at Compassion's blazing red hair before moving to Compassion's earpiece. The guide stared at the earpiece for a minute before guiltily looking away, and Compassion knew that they were in.

'Well,' she said, 'all right.' She patted her own ample girth and winked at Compassion. 'US GIRLS HAVE TO STICK TOGETHER.'

'Thank you,' the Doctor beamed. 'I'm known as the Doctor, and this is my friend Compassion.' The guide's face flickered in confusion for a split second, and the Doctor quickly added in a mock stage-whisper, 'Hippie parents.'

'Oh,' said the guide, relief shining through on her face now that Compassion was more 'normal'. (How the Doctor got away with it, Compassion noted, was ever the mystery.) 'DON'T YOU WORRY, HONEY,' she bellowed. 'OL' JANICIA HERE KNOWS ABOUT CRAZY NAMES AND PARENTS.'

She turned back to the Doctor and said in a much more reasonable volume setting, 'The bus is pretty empty today, anyway. Some Yugoslavians, some Australians, a few Americans. A couple of Brits rounds it out quite nicely.' She chuckled at her own comment before ushering them forward to where the tour bus was parked.

'Originally,' the Doctor said, 'these islands all looked like this.'

The 'this' in question was an expanse of grey rocks and dust as far as Compassion could see as the bus wound its way through a volcanic crater. Compassion wasn't finding it all that exciting. She'd seen rocks before, but apparently the American couple in the front of the bus never had from their level of oohing and aahing. One of them was digging through a gigantic backpack, shouting something about needing more film.

'Then birds flew here and brought seeds, and before long plant life was everywhere, sinking its roots into the island's face. Changing it. The animals were all brought here as well. Some were transported by the Hawaiians when they first settled these islands. Captain Cook dumped his brackish water into the bay and introduced Hawaii to the joys of mosquitoes, and rats had snuck along for the ride across the Pacific as well. With each contact, the diversity of life grew. Without it...'

The Doctor's voice trailed off for a minute, and then he gestured out at the expanse of grey. 'Nothing terribly interesting.'

Compassion shrugged. 'At least you know what you're in for,' she said. 'No hidden dangers, no alien fleets from Ixion 8 pretending to be tourists, nothing.'

One of the five Yugoslavian tourists shot Compassion a nasty look, as if Compassion had dared to interrupt her. That particular tourist had been talking non-stop for the past twenty minutes over the tour bus driver's narration, the two streams of words blending into an ugly

collision of sound. Compassion merely stared back at the harsh-faced woman until she backed down, turning back to her four friends.

'Anyway,' Compassion said, a bit quieter, 'What should we expect from the Lulqrlu invasion?'

The Doctor's face broke into one of its wide grins that Compassion had learned to loathe. 'Ah, the Lulqrlu fleet. They're due rather soon, actually. Their first contact was punctuated with a sudden--'

The back of the bus suddenly lit up, and Compassion whirled around in her seat.

It took her a second to realize that there wasn't a horde of Lulqrlu warriors waiting for her there. One of the Australians had fallen asleep, and the other Australian and their American friend had charmingly taken a picture of him. Compassion inwardly seethed and turned back around.

'...And so, with their tongues all dried out, the Lulqrlu finally gave up and went home of their own accord,' the Doctor concluded.

The bus came to a sudden stop. 'All right,' the tour guide said. 'Everyone out to see the lava tube.'

Before Compassion could object, the Doctor took her by the elbow and led her off the bus. 'Come along,' he smiled, 'the lava tube is calling.'

Two minutes later, Compassion and the Doctor were bringing up the rear of the group as they all walked into what Compassion would have called a cave. It was getting warmer and warmer, and Compassion tugged off her pullover, tying it around her waist.

'The lava flows often went underground,' the Doctor said in an excited stage whisper. 'Beneath the surface, the lava changed the internal structure of the island. At a casual glance, everything looked perfectly normal. Inside, the lava was burrowing and changing everything. Eventually, the lava flow dried up, but the traces of their passage remained, new networks created in the heart of Hawaii.'

The Doctor suddenly stopped and bent down. 'I don't think they left these behind, though,' he said, picking up a small silver device that gleamed in the last vestiges of light. He turned it over several times before slipping it into his pocket.

He looked curiously at Compassion, who quietly stared back at him.

'It's a Hyperion Time Tomb beacon,' he finally said. 'Someone liked the idea of dragging time backwards down these tubes once more.'

He gestured at Compassion, and they walked forward once more. 'I don't suppose you've seen anyone on the tour bus from the Grand Hegemony, have you?'

Compassion had to privately admit that the sudden appearance of plant life as they travelled onwards was a bit startling, especially after the barrenness of the volcanic crater. She wasn't too surprised when grass first appeared, followed by a tree or two.

When Compassion looked away for a minute to make sure the Doctor wasn't doing anything stupid (he wasn't), she turned back to the window to find them now in the midst of a tropical rain forest. It wasn't the sheer amount of plant life, she finally decided, that was so strange. It was the complexity of the plant life--there shouldn't be something that grand just lurking around the corner, waiting to explode into existence.

She finally tore her eyes away from the window to carefully study everyone else on the bus. The two Americans in the front of the bus were still oohing and ahhing over every single flower, bush, and rock the bus passed. With the number of backpacks, carrying sacks, store bags, and such attached to them, they could be hauling enough alien equipment to fuel an entire armada.

The six Yugoslavians, on the other hand, had learned how to travel without packing so much--or at least knew not to carry it all on the bus. The haggard-looking one that had glared at Compassion earlier continually flicked her gaze back at her and the Doctor, but Compassion couldn't figure out if it was curiosity or anger. Compassion briefly leaned forward to listen to their continual conversation, but quickly discovered that their conversation was not in a language she understood.

Last but not least were the two Australians and the American in the back seat, which stretched across the back of the bus. The three of them looked like the quintessential tourists--t-shirts, shorts, tans, and the like. Almost too perfect. Compassion narrowed her eyes at them as they quietly talked amongst themselves. The American was wearing a blue hat with the word 'Hawaii' emblazoned across it. Almost as if he

was trying a little too well to blend in. For that matter, Compassion couldn't figure out how the American fit in with the two Australians. Was he friends with an Australian husband and wife? Connected to the Australian woman who brought her brother? Connected to the Australian man who brought his sister?

And more importantly, Compassion asked herself, *why do I care?*

It was that question which bothered her the most.

'Rainbow Falls!' Janicia called out, stopping the bus. Compassion gave a resigned look to the Doctor as he ushered her off the bus along with the rest of the tourists.

'It's our last stop before the airport,' the Doctor murmured. 'Almost there.' Compassion merely snorted, but walked with the others up the steep trail to the top of the waterfall.

It wasn't a terribly impressive waterfall, Compassion finally decided. There was water, and it was falling, so technically it was a waterfall, but she was expecting something a little more powerful.

'Look at that water,' the Doctor said, pointing at it. 'It's been cutting through the cliff face for who knows how many years, wearing it down. Bit by bit, the water makes the rock do what it wants, even though you think it would be the other way around. Hawaii is a place of continual change.'

Compassion shrugged. 'And what about the Hyperion beacon?'

'What about it?' the Doctor said, his tone light.

'Who planted it in the lava tube?' she said through gritted teeth. 'Anathema never directly contacted the Grand Hegemony, but we knew of them. They're not native to this section of the galaxy, so it was obviously a deliberate placement.'

The Doctor merely raised an eyebrow. 'Yes, yes,' he said. 'But who?'

Compassion frowned. 'I'm not sure,' she finally said. 'If anyone's hauling around equipment, it's the Americans. On the other hand, the beacons are small. Even the Australians could have slipped those into their pockets.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Anything else you noticed?' he said, as they walked closer to the cliff's edge.

Compassion thought about it for a moment and then shook her head. 'No,' she said flatly.

'Not even that the--?'

Out of the corner of her eye, Compassion saw one of the Australians hurtle towards her at great speed. She instinctively tried to dodge, and slightly succeeded; instead of hitting her head-on, he glanced off her. The impact was still enough to send Compassion flying forward--and directly towards the cliff edge.

For one split second, Compassion felt like she was hanging in mid-air, suspended over the edge, looking down into where the water was. Could she survive that sort of fall? Her earpiece felt hot in her ear, burning her with its intensity. She felt herself reaching for something, anything...

...and then just as suddenly, felt her waist somehow being jerked backwards, the entire world snapping back into focus. A split-second later, two more pairs of hands grabbed her arms, and she was stepping backwards from the edge with the help of the American couple.

Turning around, the Doctor had a relieved expression even as he picked threads of red wool out of his fingers. 'It's just as well you did wear that outfit,' he smiled. Compassion glanced down at her red pullover tied around her waist, and noted the finger-shaped depressions gouged into its weave.

'I don't know what happened!' the Australian was babbling. 'I slid or something and... and... oh God, are you all right?'

'Obviously,' Compassion replied, turning away from him. The Doctor quickly followed her.

Once they were a safe distance away, Compassion turned to look at the group of tourists. 'It's not the Australian,' she finally said. 'Or if it is, he's an incredibly stupid invader.'

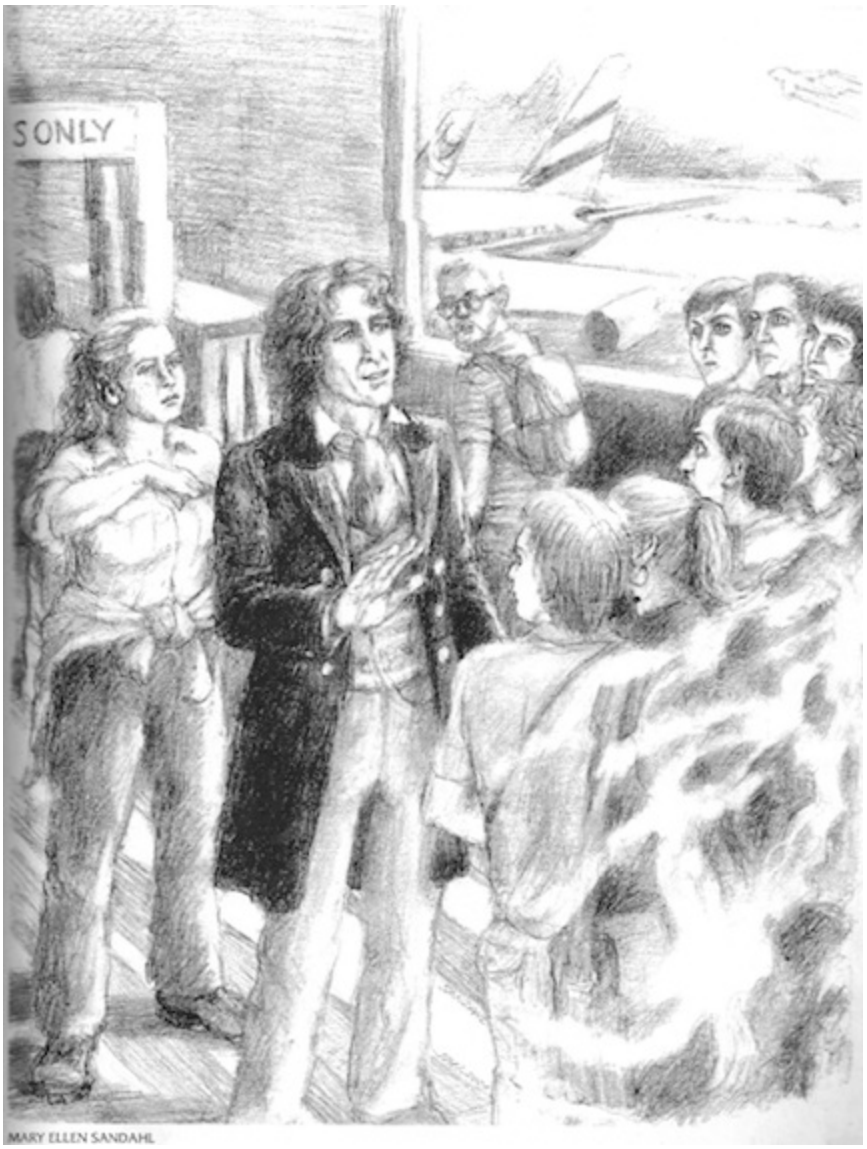
The Doctor nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes, absolutely right. He almost went off the edge with you--if he'd really wanted to push you over, he'd have shoved you, not sent himself flying at the cliff.'

Compassion stood in silence, running the options over in her mind. Were any of them members of the Grand Hegemony? Was this all a fruitless search with the real culprits light years away? She glanced at

the Doctor, who was inflicting that idiot grin on her. He knew something, and for once he'd learned to keep his mouth shut.

'Take a breath,' the Doctor advised. 'Count to five. Or six, you need to.'

Compassion was about to tell him where to put that breath when it all clicked into place.



'Oh,' she finally said.

'Thank you again, dear lady,' the Doctor said to Janicia. 'Compassion and I appreciate your help so very much.' He shyly grinned at Janicia, who bashfully looked at the floor.

'The pleasure was all mine,' she finally said. 'You come back any time, you understand?' She looked like she was about to say something else when Compassion suddenly pushed past the Doctor to get down the stairs of the bus.

'IT WAS NICE MEETING YOU TOO, HONEY,' Janicia bellowed to Compassion. 'YOU TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR FRIEND NOW, YOU HEAR?'

'I hear,' Compassion muttered, scanning the crowds of people getting off buses at the Hilo International Airport. Where did they go... she couldn't have lost them in the crowd...

'Doctor!' Compassion suddenly shouted. 'Hurry!' she said, running towards the security gates. A moment later, the Doctor had jogged up to her position.

'Now remember, follow my lead,' he said, effortlessly keeping apace with Compassion as they wove through the hordes of tourists. 'You remember the plan?'

The Doctor winced at the look Compassion gave him in response. 'Clearly, yes,' he said. 'Or should I say, obviously?' He winced again as the look from Compassion intensified.

A second later, and the Doctor had skidded to a halt. 'Leaving so soon?' he smiled to the group of five Yugoslavians about to queue up for the security gates.

One of them grunted something unintelligible in response.

'Now now now,' the Doctor replied, a grin coming over his face. 'I should warn you that making random sounds at me pretending to be speaking a foreign language doesn't work. It's a gift, you see, my language skills.'

The Yugoslavians were eyeing the Doctor cautiously now.

'But the real tip-off was your laziness with the matter shaper,' he sighed. 'One second there were five of you, then six, then five again. I'm sure humanoids must all look alike to someone from the Grand Hegemony, but to any close observer it was rather obvious. Very clever, incidentally, splitting off another body to push the Australian towards Compassion before merging it back in.'

The seven--or was it eight? --Yugoslavians took a step towards the Doctor. Their eyes gleamed as one.

'Oh, before you start transforming yourself any further,' the Doctor quickly added, 'there's one thing you should know. You see, earlier on our journey...'

The lead Yugoslavian reached a lengthening hand towards the Doctor, moving rapidly towards his throat.

'...we found your Hyperion Time Tomb beacon,' Compassion helpfully finished, flicking the glittering device into the centre of the beings.

The beacon suddenly exploded with a prismatic display of light, every colour of the rainbow arcing out and enveloping the nine Yugoslavians. Compassion stumbled backwards, her gut twisting as the light radiated outwards. Red, yellow, indigo, orange... she couldn't take her eyes off the display.

The figures screamed, a high-pitched sound that made even the most entranced observers clap their hands over their ears. Only the Doctor stood still, watching as the seven bodies melted into six, then five, then two, then one... and then something radically different.

With a second shriek, the bloblike creature slammed a pseudopod down on the beacon, which abruptly shut down. There was a moment of silence as its dozens of plate-sized eyes looked around at all the tourists staring at it in horrified fascination.

Then the room erupted in bursts of light as camera after camera snapped pictures.

'Funny,' the Doctor murmured as they quietly sat on a small hill just outside of Oahu's International Airport. 'You think the US Customs arresting an alien from the Grand Hegemony for illegal entry into the United States would have made enough news to make it into history.'

After a moment of silence, he added, 'Of course, all those pictures will never come out with all the light reflecting off its eyes. Poor thing will probably be blind for weeks, if not more.'

Compassion slowly nodded. 'Overwhelmed by the light coming at it from all sides.'

'Indeed,' the Doctor said. 'You can't always plan out perfectly what's going to happen. Sometimes the world around you just acts in different ways. This poor hunk of rock never thought it was going to... to...'

His voice trailed off, and he scrambled to his feet, pulling out his pocket watch. He casually flicked the case open with a graceful backhand, and glanced down at its face. Compassion pulled herself up as well as the Doctor stuffed the watch back into his pocket.

'It's time,' he breathed. 'Come on!' the Doctor suddenly shouted, a broad grin breaking across his face as he took off down the hill.

Startled, Compassion headed after him, jogging at first and then breaking into a run. She couldn't explain the sudden need to keep up with the Doctor, to follow him. The wind blew behind her, and the warm air seemed to almost lift her across the land.

'The plane from Guam is here,' the Doctor cried over his shoulder. 'They stowed away in the wheel well and dropped out upon landing. One of the airport staff thought they saw them... but the dogs couldn't find them.'

Who? Compassion wanted to ask, but she was trying just to keep up with the Doctor at this point, who was still picking up speed as they ran across the land.

'They... they would have gone this way...' the Doctor gasped out. At least he was getting winded too. 'We've got to hurry, though... if they split up, we might not find... them both...'

The Doctor suddenly skidded to a halt, Compassion desperately trying to keep from slamming into him. The Doctor pointed downwards, and it took Compassion a second to see in the twilight what he was pointing at.

Two medium sized brown snakes.

The Doctor slowly reached into his pockets, digging through them in as calm a manner as he could. 'There there,' he said softly. 'Just stay still for a minute.'

The two snakes shifted their coils slightly, but seemed content to remain still for the moment.

Slowly the Doctor pulled out what looked like two jumbles of string covered in pocket-fluff. Transferring one into his other hand, he slowly extended an arm to Compassion. 'Take it,' he whispered, 'and get ready to throw on my mark. One... two...'

One of the snakes, with no warning, suddenly took off, slithering at

a speed that Compassion wouldn't have thought possible without legs.

'Think fast!' the Doctor shouted, throwing one of the jumbles at Compassion, who reflexively put her hands up to catch it. The Doctor tore off in hot pursuit of the second snake, leaving Compassion holding an incomprehensible mass of threads, or wires, or something. The texture was odd, almost slick to the touch as it seemed to both burn and freeze Compassion's hands.

At her feet, the brown snake hissed, rearing up to open its mouth threateningly. Compassion instinctively flung the mass at the creature--and managed to be slightly surprised as the individual threads burst into a bright gold colour, shifting and twisting through the air. The brown snake shot back, but the jumble of threads was quicker, zooming after the retreating snake and wrapping itself around the creature. The snake thrashed back and forth, hissing with greater volume as it quickly became entangled.

Within moments, the snake was practically tied into a ball, as the threads contracted around the creature, tugging it into positions it couldn't break free from. Compassion slowly bent down and gingerly touched the creature. It hissed angrily in response.

'You'd bite me if you could,' she said quietly. 'We came all this way to stop something as simple as you.'

Carefully, she picked the bound creature up and looked at it carefully. Obviously, it was a threat. What if it broke loose? Compassion knew well enough that the Doctor's contraptions could break down at a moment's notice; everything he touched seemed to explode these days.

Compassion laid the creature back down on the ground before picking up a large volcanic rock. Better to just stop it now, right? She raised the rock up into the air, preparing to drive it into the snake's skull. It was the right thing to do, after all. She could keep the islands free of its presence. She *needed* to kill it.

So why was she trying to justify her actions?

Compassion dropped the rock, scrambling backwards. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she kill this stupid animal? Why... why... what...

And then her whole body felt hot now, as if her entire body was her earpiece. She closed her eyes, extending her arms out into the air. She could feel it. She could feel the island, pulsing up through her body.

No, she *was* the island.

It was all so clear now. She could feel the lava burning through her cold, solid interior. Creating new passageways, new routes, new methods. The water was cutting through her defences, slowly wearing her down, making her more receptive to new ideas, new ways of thinking. And on her surface, life was starting to take root as each experience touched her. She stumbled forwards, the heat building in her body. The lava was flowing out of her heart, into her arms and legs. Her fingers tingled with the burning sensation, as she was remade from the inside out. Bit by bit, the outside forces moulded, shaped, reformed her into... into...

'Compassion!'

Her eyes shot open. The moment was gone, and she was crouched in front of the bound brown snake.

'You've caught your snake,' he cried, hurrying over to her with a brightly-lit bundle in his hands.

The knowledge was on the tip of her tongue, and she struggled to tell the Doctor, to vocalize it before it was lost. She was so close, she could feel herself teetering on the edge of the cliff, the Doctor's presence pulling her back at the last second...

She shook her head. 'Obviously,' she finally said, unable to think of anything else. Why did she feel so light-headed? She looked around, accusingly, at the vegetation. All the pollen in the air, perhaps. As she picked up the snake and stood up, she couldn't help but feel like she'd learned something very important, only to have it taken away again.

'I'm glad we were able to catch these,' the Doctor said. 'Outside forces brought all sorts of things to the Hawaiian Islands - mosquitoes, rats, mongoose - but the one thing they didn't bring were snakes.

'Hawaii wouldn't be able to cope with snakes of any sort, even ones as benign as these brown snakes,' the Doctor continued. 'You've got to keep an eye on places like this, keep the bad influences out.'

'I thought you said Hawaii had some bad elements,' Compassion

promptly replied.

'Well, no one's perfect,' the Doctor admitted. 'And I did at least manage to keep Kauai mongoose-free. You just have to learn which battles to fight and which ones to roll with the punches. Pick the right ones, and, well...' The Doctor's voice trailed off, and he slowly turned around in a complete circle, a large grin on his face. 'Paradise,' he finally said.

Compassion merely stared at him.

'Well now,' he said. 'I suppose the next order of business is to find a way to sneak these two little fellows back over to the Big Island and the TARDIS. One quick trip to Guam should take care of them, plus we still need to pick up Fitz...' His voice trailed off for a moment. 'Perhaps a vacation is in order.'

'A vacation?' Compassion repeated, uncomprehending. 'Didn't we just have one?'

The Doctor frowned at that, and began to stride towards the main bulk of the airport off in the distance. 'Perhaps not a vacation, per se,' he murmured. 'But we've still got a lot of work ahead of us, Compassion. And a long hike back to the TARDIS.'

Compassion opened her mouth, prepared to point out that once again he'd stated the obvious.

Instead she said, 'All right.'

And slowly the two began to head home to the TARDIS.

Outside Forces II: Meanwhile

GREG McELHATTON

At the annual meeting of the British Institute of Graphologists, it seemed like another boring session. A speaker was up at the podium, droning on as he pointed at curves and jagged edges of someone's signature. What most of the attendees would remember that day, however, was not the lecture itself, but a brief disturbance in the back of the lecture hall...

Victoria Waterfield suddenly sat upright in her chair as the man next to her whispered something in her ear. Her face turned bright red, first with embarrassment, then anger. A second later, she slapped him across the face. 'You beast!' she exploded. 'Get away from me!' With that, she scrambled out of her chair and ran from the room.

Fitz rubbed his cheek ruefully. He looked back defiantly at the number of shocked expressions directed at him. 'Well, you never know until you try,' he finally said.

The Great Eskape

NICK WALTERS

There was a moment of disorientation, and then Doctor Skagra found himself, to his rage and disbelief, in the brig.

'Ship!' he bellowed, 'Let me out of here! I am your Lord Skagra! Let me out!

'I am very much afraid I can no longer accept your orders.' There was a haughty tone to the Ship's female voice which set Skagra's teeth on edge. 'You are an enemy of my Lord, the Doctor.'

The Doctor! Skagra grimaced, his whole body vibrating in anger. 'I am your Lord! I built you! Release me, I command you! And launch instantly!'

Again, the Ship disregarded his commands. 'Do you know the Doctor well? He is a wonderful man. He has done the most extraordinary things to my circuitry.'

Skagra pressed his hands to his head, hardly believing what he was hearing. What had the Doctor done to his Ship? Skagra couldn't bear the thought of being outwitted by such an irreverent buffoon. 'Release me!'

'Truly wonderful,' said the Ship in a tone of syrupy admiration. 'If you like I will tell you all about him.'

Skagra fell to his knees, despair swamping him. 'Let me out,' he sobbed. 'Let me out.'

A ripple of mocking laughter was the Ship's response. It had never laughed before. Skagra curled into the foetal position, hands clamped over his ears. But he couldn't blot out the voice.

'Greatest of all the Time Lords, the Doctor left Gallifrey to explore the universe and meet lots of new friends. Like me! Along the way he vanquished many evil foes. Let me tell you about all his victories. I'll start with his struggle against the vile Lard Men of Mazzolia...'

Skagra screamed. Truly, he was in hell. But despair wasn't in Doctor Skagra's nature, so he got back to his feet and pounded the wall until

his fists were numb. The Ship should be singing his, Skagra's, praises!

'Ship!' he commanded. 'I order you to stop this catalogue of inanities!'

It paid him no attention whatsoever.

Over the next few hours, Doctor Skagra tried endless combinations of orders, hoping that one of them would jog the Ship into remembering its true Lord, but it had clearly been too thoroughly re-programmed. He changed tack and tried reasoning with the Ship, trying to make it see how the Doctor had perverted its nature. But it completely ignored him, continuing to list the Doctor's victories. Despair began to eat at him again -- but even so, Skagra did not once try pleading with the Ship. He didn't entertain the idea for even a second.

Doctor Nikkolai Skagra, beg for mercy?!

He would rather suffer an infinity of exquisite surgical torture on the most sensitive parts of his body before lowering himself to that. Begging was, to Skagra, a sign of weakness. And Doctor Skagra would not admit to a single weakness. Doctor Skagra was invincible, irresistible, invulnerable -

- Imprisoned. In the brig of his own Ship.

Finally, after what seemed like days, Doctor Skagra lay down exhausted, arms folded across his chest, and waited with psychotic patience for death or madness, whichever came first. The harsh lighting of the brig combined with the pristine walls to create an achromatic glare so intense that Skagra could imagine that he was already in limbo. His stomach growled with hunger, and Skagra cursed his body, the body he would have left behind had his plans for the Universal Mind come to fruition.

And still the Ship wittered on and on in a tone of insane enthusiasm about the exploits of its new Lord. There seemed to be an endless series of them, an eternity of miraculous last-minute victories over power-mad dictators, insane computers, implacable hive minds, amorphous alien masses, evil corporations, warmongering clone races, emotionless cyborgs -- and hubristic scientists...

Was Doctor Skagra merely the latest in the long line of the beaten?

Had his defeat been inevitable all along, the Doctor's victory somehow guaranteed by the invisible forces which bound the universe together? The unending stream of triumphs seemed to imply this, to doom Skagra to rot in the brig of his own Ship, forgotten, shoved casually to the side of the chessboard.

Though his hatred of the Doctor was infinite, a small flame within Skagra burned with admiration for the Time Lord. A worthy foe indeed. The way he'd trapped Skagra by turning his own Ship against him was exquisite. And to have the Ship recount the Doctor's adventures indicated a streak of cruelty in the Doctor with which Skagra could well identify. Cruelty, arrogance, intelligence -- all these both Skagra and the Doctor possessed. If things had been different, they could have been allies. But no, the Doctor had to have it his own way, couldn't see the brilliance of Skagra's plan to create a Universal Mind - with Skagra ruling over all, of course. No, the Doctor had to speak up for the individual, make stupid jokes, wear ridiculous clothes and not appear to take anything seriously, even the dangerous business of time travel. And now this, the final humiliation.

'The inhabitants of the planet Centreb Minor were so grateful that he had saved them from the dreaded slobberings of the foul Scrunge Worms that they built a giant statue of the Doctor in honour of his glory -- a statue fashioned completely of raspberry ripple ice-cream!'

Skagra couldn't take much more of this. 'Ship, I beg of you, stop! Please, stop.'

With cold shock, Doctor Skagra realised what he'd done. He'd pleaded. The Doctor had brought him to this! He put his head in his hands and screamed. Through the sound of his own yelling voice, he heard -- nothing. The Ship had stopped!

He stood up, hope flowering within him. 'Ship! Return me the bridge.'

'Are you listening now?' came the Ship's voice, treacly an indulgent. 'Then I'll continue... the ghastly affair of the Fombuggi seemed at first to spell certain doom for my wonderful Lord...'

And so the endless fanfare continued.

Skagra roared in rage, beyond despair now.

He paced the floor of the brig, recalling better days, trying to blank out the horror of the present with the glories of the past...

Back on the planet Drornid when he'd ruled the domain of Nixidom from his Kastle, Skagra had been a feared figure commanding the respect of the crime bosses who more or less ran the planet. The whole of Drornid was a mess; shantytowns, mobs, factions, bounty hunters, and its level of technology was rapidly regressing. The perfect base for Doctor Skagra, geneticist, astro-engineer, cyberneticist, neuro-structuralist and moral theologian, to formulate his plans for universal domination. Nixidom was the only area on Drornid that the crime syndicates left alone. They sometimes asked for his assistance in technical matters, but only rarely, and since the beginning of his Universal Mind project he'd stopped answering any requests. He'd become a recluse, left to perform his experiments in peace within the ebon walls of Kastle Skagra, far away from the deteriorating chaos which passed for society on Drornid. Of course, the parlous state of the planet was mostly the fault of the Time Lords. They'd ruined Drornid after they'd taken their rival President back into their dusty, dour fold. Doctor Skagra had always borne them a grudge for that, though the bits of technology they'd left lying around had allowed him to make quantum leaps in his work. And now, to be defeated by one of their milk-blooded number. It was almost as if they had set him up to knock him down...

Skagra stopped his pacing, alert to this worrying new possibility. Was he being too paranoid? Or were they really out to get him? Had that gangling, embarrassing idiot the Doctor really been a crack Time Lord agent? Skagra couldn't believe it. More likely, it had been the Time Lady, Romana. Cool, calm, calculating -everything the Doctor wasn't. Skagra remembered her fine, aristocratic features well. He let his mind linger on her image. Now there was a fitting consort for Skagra. If only he could escape... but he'd tried everything, everything, everything!

But...

Maybe not. Maybe he could exploit the Ship's new loyalty.

It would not be pleasant, but nothing could possibly be worse than his current predicament. Skagra stood in the centre of the brig, braced himself, and listened to what the Ship was saying:

'The Doctor ducked down behind the font with his good friends Sarah Jane Smith and Harry Sullivan, and smiled reassuringly at the quaking Reverend Insteppe. Suddenly there was a deafening explosion and the Urgfiend shrine was utterly destroyed, killing all the hateful worshippers within and sealing in the Urg-Demon forever. Once more the Doctor had saved the day...'

In a burst of action, Skagra applauded and cheered loudly, shouting the Doctor's praises until his throat ached.

As he'd hoped, the Ship's voice faltered.

A moment of silence, then:

'So at last you see what a wonderful man the Doctor is!' it gushed.

'Absolutely,' said Skagra, forcing himself to say the words, though they stuck in his throat. 'He is, perhaps, the most... intelligent, witty, charming, sublime being in the whole universe.'

'There's no "perhaps" about it,' said the Ship prissily.

'Of course, of course.' Skagra thought quickly. 'You are right to worship the Doctor as your Lord. But -'

'But?'

'But,' said Skagra, feeling as though he was walking on eggshells, 'where is he now, this exalted Doctor, this Lord of yours? Where is he to give you commands, set your coordinates?'

Silence.

Then: 'The Doctor is dead.'

Skagra almost choked. Dead? He remembered how he had assumed that the Doctor had died after his mind had been taken into the Sphere. He remembered how surprised he had been later on seeing the Doctor alive. He had no idea how the Doctor had survived, but clearly the Ship still thought he was dead. Victory was in Skagra's grasp!

'If the Doctor is dead,' said Skagra slowly, 'how can he be your Lord?'

More silence, which seemed to last an age.

Then: 'The Doctor... is my Lord.'

Skagra glared up at the ceiling. He almost had it! 'But he's dead! You said so yourself.'

'The Doctor... is dead. There is a certain confusion in my circuitry

but he is truly my Lord.' Its voice perked up again. 'Let me tell you about his exciting confrontation with Phulorg J'Hoox, Intergalactic Purloiner of Cutlery!'

'No!' cried Skagra, beginning to panic. 'Maybe later... tell me, how can he be your Lord if he does not exist?' Skagra felt light-headed, almost giddy. 'I am alive, I exist. Therefore, logic dictates that I, the living Doctor Skagra, am your Lord, not this phantom Doctor!' Skagra struck a pose, hand on hips, brow raised upwards, fiercely willing the Ship to obey.

There was a pause.

And then the Ship spoke. 'You exist.'

'Yes!' said Skagra, maintaining his pose.

'And the Doctor does not.'

'He does not!'

There was another, longer pause. Then:

'What are your orders, my Lord Skagra?'

Skagra strutted around the brig, hands on hips, a sense of joy swelling within him, a laugh almost escaping from him -- until he checked himself, remembering that laughing was a Doctor thing to do. 'Release me! Release me now!'

A glowing cube surrounded him, and after a moment of disorientation, Skagra found himself back on the bridge of the Ship. His Ship, no doubt about that now. He swayed on his feet, hardly able to believe he was free. But then, of course, he was Skagra -- as if a fool such as the Doctor could outwit him! How long had he been imprisoned? A quick check -- two days. Was that all? The recounting of the Doctor's interminable travels had made it seem much, much longer, especially the tale of the Planet of the Badger-Men. Skagra shuddered. How had he survived? 'Take us out of here!'

'Destination?' said the Ship. Its voice held no hint of remorse or apology. Should he punish it? He decided against it -- the main thing was, he was free; once back in Kastle Skagra he would reprogram the Ship, make it tamper-proof.

And then he would hunt down and destroy the Doctor.

'Destination, Drornid.'

The image of Kastle Skagra rose in his mind like a dark phantom.

Unable to hold back his mirth any longer, Doctor Skagra allowed himself a small, taut smile of satisfaction.

They had only been travelling for a few minutes when the Ship spoke up, its pleasingly obsequious tone carrying a note of urgency 'My Lord Skagra...'

'What is it?'

'We're under attack.' The Ship sounded surprised.

'What!' Skagra activated the screen. It showed a flotilla of large ships bristling with weaponry bearing right down on them. Military insignia graced the side of the larger vessels.

'You fool!' he cried. 'Whilst you sang that cretin's praises you left us vulnerable! Engage -'

Before Skagra could complete the command, the Ship shuddered under the impact of a great many energy weapons, the floor rocked under Skagra's feet and with a yell he overbalanced.

The last thing he heard before his head hit the side of a console and he blacked out was the Ship's voice, humbled in apology:

'I'm very, very sor -'

Doctor Skagra regained consciousness to find himself wrapped in chilly darkness. He sat up, his booted feet scraping against a scarred metal floor. Dark shadows pressed in from every side, the only thing he could make out was the mist of his breath meeting the cold air of - wherever this was. Far above, murky light filtered through a tiny window.

'Ship!' he bellowed, more out of habit than for any logical reason. His voice echoed like that of someone at the bottom of a very deep well. A throbbing pain asserted itself, pulsing away behind his eyes as though there was something trying to get out. Wincing, he lifted his hands to his head, gently probing the injury. A tender bruise swelled beneath his fingers. A metallic chinking sound accompanied his every movement but it was a while before he realised what it was, his mind being preoccupied with wondering where he was and how he got there. Then he remembered -- his escape, the ships, the attack...

Spurred on by anger, Doctor Skagra leapt to his feet. Something was dragging at his arms and legs, and he realised with horror and rage that his hands and feet were chained to the wall behind him.

Thick, flaking hoops of rusted metal encased his ankles and wrists. He could only move about in a small arc, barely a pace into the cell. He tugged frantically at his bonds, but they held fast. No reasoning his way out of this prison.

Skagra twisted round and pounded on the wall, creating a noise like rolling thunder, sending the chains jangling and bouncing against his body. His bellowing voice rose above all. 'Let me out! Let me out of here now, I demand it!'

No answer came.

He sank back down to the floor, nursing his throbbing head.

As his eyes adjusted to the near-darkness, Skagra realised that he was not alone. There was someone slumped against the far wall of the cell, a mere ten feet away. A gaunt figure in rags with eyes which gleamed wetly. From an invisible mouth a voice cackled. 'Company! Company at la la last...'

Moving as far forward as his bonds allowed, Skagra squinted at the figure, nose wrinkling up at the foetid smell which rose from it. He could just make out thin legs splayed wide, pale crab-like hands twisted in a hollow lap, chains snaking from them to the wall behind. An egg-shaped head sunk on a narrow chest, a strand of saliva drooling from the corner of a mouth that gaped in a toothless smile. And eyes like marbles that caught the distant light from the window far above.

Skagra felt uncomfortable in the dull glare of such an ancient creature. 'Who are you, old man?'

'A prisoner, just like you, la la. I've been here so la la long I'd almost forgotten how to talk.'

An ancient, worthless imbecile. Skagra's lip curled in a sneer of disgust. 'Where am I? Who has dared to imprison me?'

The old man laughed in reply, a deranged cackle that snaked its way through the darkness and invaded Skagra's head. He remembered the way his Ship had laughed...

'Silence!' cried Skagra, pounding his fists against the metal floor, feeling his bonds bite into his wrists, almost welcoming the pain.

In answer, more laughter. 'La la la! La... But now that I've remembered how to talk, let me tell you my story, la la.'

A black pit opened in Skagra's mind, over which his sanity teetered

back and forth like an undecided suicide.

'Let me tell you the story of my la la life.'

'No!' bellowed Skagra, straining forward, hands reaching out to strangle, pulling against the chains It was no use. He couldn't reach the gibbering, dribbling wreck, couldn't even get anywhere near. Skagra cried out, wishing his voice was a weapon to crush this senile old fool. But it wasn't. He slumped back against the wall, defeated.

And so the old man began the long, rambling and disjointed story of his long, long life, and there was nothing Doctor Skagra could do but listen.

Revolver

SIMON JOHN GERARD

Nobody had been down here in years, the Doctor mused, idly naming a finger along the length of the metal shelf. Dust collected in a neat line either side of the newly shining route his finger had created, forming two long, peaked edges in which unseen microscopic nanobots reacted to the sudden alteration of their terrain; precision-engineering that no longer served a function yet still worked away at a long-redundant programme.

He stared at the grey patch that covered his finger and thought of getting a cleaner in, maybe just for an hour or so every thirty years. Zoe had mentioned that her room in the TARDIS seemed to collect strange objects around the base of the closet; she was certain she hadn't done it herself and blamed the Doctor for using her room as a temporary workshop. Well, it wasn't him, he had indignantly huffed in response, but he promised to look into the matter just as soon as he had a moment to spare...

That must have been some time back because he distinctly recalled that she appeared in the console room at one point, lugging a very large box which she then dumped in the middle of the floor in front of him. 'Yours, I believe!' she said and stormed out again.

He had stared at the box for a moment, then back at the Time Configuration switch he'd been working on, before settling cross-legged on the floor, rolling his sleeves up and diving into the array of strange treasures that her room had materialised over the past weeks.

With the air of a magician producing rabbits from a hat, the Doctor plucked an item at random from the box and turned it over and around in his hands: 'Ah! I could have done with you yesterday' he told the object. A curved blade of metal with a slit through the centre, and a short, stocky wooden handle wrapped with orange twine. 'A Lancashire Peeler! Quite the best thing for peeling potatoes, and jolly effective for taking histological samples of organic matter. I must put that

somewhere safe...' and consigned it to a space near his foot.

What next? His fingers probed the dark interior of the box and settled on a smooth flexible shape which he brought out into the light. 'Steady on there!' the shape shouted and the Doctor dropped it onto the floor in surprise. A primary coloured snake of some kind raised itself up on its tail and squinted at him with its one large, bright blue eye.

'No, don't tell me! You forgot me, didn't you, pal!' the snake squealed.

'Oh, how do you do!' said the Doctor, rubbing his hands together with excitement. 'I knew you were around here somewhere but I just couldn't remember where. What have you been doing with yourself?'

The snake coiled and uncoiled a few times before leaning forward in a conspiratorial way. 'Truth is, mate, I've been all over the place looking for a new tie, y'know? S'pose you wouldn't happen to have one of your bow-ties spare, would you?'

The Doctor eyed the snake's threadbare tie and felt a pang of pity. His entire race wiped out but he still had the desire to dress well and keep up appearances. 'Why don't you pop along to the wardrobe and have a look in the 47th drawer on the left? Anything you see that catches your eye – er, well, you know what I mean – you can have with pleasure!'

The snake blinked rapidly and darted back and forth in a fast motion. 'Mr Doctor, I love you, I really do! You're a gent!' he laughed and slithered out of the room to be followed immediately by a scream and then a Scottish voice saying 'Och Zoe, it's only a wee yellow worm with a red-spotted necktie!'

Returning to the box, the Doctor fished out a bizarre collection of objects, many of which he'd never seen before. After a long examination of each one, he placed them into piles which he'd designated 'Jolly Useful', 'Really Jolly Useful', and 'OH MY WORD, YES!'. Strangely, the latter pile was stacked high...

The objects in the box didn't seem to be reducing in number despite the feeling that he'd already been searching through it for hours. The TARDIS seemed extraordinarily quiet, save for the gentle hypnotic hum of power-adaptors and the clicking of binary circuits within the console.

Even the shouts of Jamie and Zoe had subdued.

Sometimes, late into the artificial evenings, he would amble along the corridors just thinking and humming fragments of tunes. There were times when he would stand close – but out of sight – to the rooms his companions used. He would hear their laughter; the brusque jokes of Jamie being met by the mock indignation of Zoe, and he would feel quite, quite sad. Like a parent who tried to interest his children in all manner of things, he knew that at the end of the day they would share their private conversations and he would never be allowed to join in. They were like a family, he thought, but even good families part in the end.

Cotton reels, sub-orbital probes, axio-lateral displacement capsules, jam, a toucan, numbers, all came from the box and all were placed in their correct piles. And then there was something familiar; something warm to the touch. A disc made of a flexible metal that gave off little ripples of displaced air where the softly glowing material made contact with the cooler environs of the TARDIS.

Below the main disc was a metal spike with a dulled end. It sat through the axis of the disc, protruding from it by a centimetre or two. The Doctor prodded it. It rang. In the quiet of the room, the sound entered his skin and rang through his body.

'I know this!' he murmured under his breath, and prodded at it again. It rang again. He placed it down onto the smooth surface of the floor and pushed it gently. It rang again, but this time longer and with a truer note.

The Doctor stared at the disc as it sang to him. His mouth flexed from the puzzled downturn to a wide smile, and he scratched his head before patting down the unruly mass of hair again. He reached out and pushed the disc again.

'Sing!' he shouted, with a look of rapture covering his face. 'Sing! Sing for me!'

The disc obliged, and a keen note sailed through the console room as it turned. It filled every space, every roundel, every atom with pure music; just a single note that held the potential for every note ever heard. It reached deep into the Doctor's hearts, rushed up into his brain, poured through every vein until it ebbed away so slowly that it

was impossible to tell if it was really fading away.

He jumped to his feet and crossed the room to where the disc was spinning down to a halt. He waited until the last pulse of the note had slipped into the silence and reached down to pick up the object. As he did, he remembered the last time he had heard that note; so many, *many* years ago!

A boy. A tiny boy looking up at the stars and laughing with the joy of that sound as it moved further out across his home skies, and up and up through the faint clouds and beyond and into the black sheet of night that lay pebbled with diamond lights. Out in the space between the stars, he heard the note ring, and he laughed and laughed until...

So many years ago.

And now, ages past, lives lived, home abandoned and stars explored, it was here again. Just one tone that splashed the air with the promise of everything. Just one note that brought him here. Just one beautiful note that kept him searching for a place where there was a star that was yet to hear that simple sound. He had always wanted to fill the universe with that sound; just to let people hear something that would open their eyes and help them see what they had that was worth being alive for.

He held the disc in his hand and caught a glimpse of something in its reflection.

'Nearly time, then?' he asked the reflection. 'Well, never mind. I'm not afraid you know. Not now.'

Placing the disc in a pocket, he walked to the central console and flicked a switch. The screen opened onto the gas-giants and iridescent nebula of a galaxy, and the Doctor watched it all just *happening* out there. With another switch, he turned on the audio circuit and listened as the radioactive stars boomed out their irregular signals, and the space between space filled the TARDIS speakers with the sound of the ocean.

In the midst of the universe's sound, a far away pure tone called out to him from the dark.

And he answered…

The Puppet King

DALE SMITH

It comes to me in flashes. There are memories here -- corroded powder memories -- that occasionally, rarely, flare and spark and burst with... It comes to me in flashes. Another life, somewhere bright. Another that I talked with -- long, involved *conversation* faster than thought. But I know that this cannot be true: there are only my subjects to talk with, and their conversation is slow, grinding like cog on cog. Only my subjects to talk with, and the enemy.

'We must attack,' one of my subjects tells me, without his lips ever moving. What lips they have.

They are a strange people, my people. *We* are a strange people: am I not one of them? Higher, yes. Ordained, yes. Blessed, cursed, yes, yes, yes. But still one of them. I see the world with my eyes, my ears, my antennae combined -- must do because they do. My hearts beat inside my carapace as do theirs. I cannot feel them, but I feel theirs and know mine must be the same. Because I look just as they do, just as they do.

'We must attack,' he screams, in silence. 'Tell us what is your will.'

They are a strange people. They scream at me constantly, always the same desires. The enemy must be destroyed. My people must survive, must leave this dusty prison and spread their seed once more throughout eternity. The constant urge to prevail is all I feel from them -- all that drives through them -- and yet at the same time, with the same urgency, they beg me to lead them. They crave my command, they must know my desires, obey my commands. And so I command them. I command them to prepare for the attack. I am their king. I am their puppet. What other choice do I have?

I am never alone any more. It seems to me I was alone before, in . . . a spark, pain and the memory burns away. It seems to me I was alone, before. But now they are always with me, my people, the Tractators. Even when they are not here with me, I hear their insistent

gnaw in my head. We are trapped. We are alone. We are attacked. We must retaliate. I do not mind the sound: it gives me something to build myself around. Sometimes, I feel myself slipping -- my mind so many grains of sand, trickling away in the breeze. When I do, their desires pull me home. They keep me whole.

A sound, above. The dull thud of the bombardment striking the shell of the planet that protects us. That ensnares us.

My people are a remarkable people. With the merest of twitches, the very forces of creation heed their every whim like . . . like a puppet king. They pull the asteroids from their orbit thousands of miles above and bring them down, all within the same small patch of earth. That small patch of earth the enemy have claimed for their own, never caring it was ours long before. We hate the humans: they scurry around like insects, without a Gravis to protect them, to instruct them, to rule them. They scheme, they dig, they mistrust.

You can't trust it --

Another flare in my mind. It seems to me that the mistrust of humans is the worst of their faults. I would know of it well, were I more myself. If I knew who myself was.

What would I give to know myself again? My kingdom, my kingdom.

I do not join my subjects in the attack. It seems to me that I should, yet they have not questioned me for it. I see them draw patterns in the flow of gravity, I see the movements they make --the dance they perform -- to bend it to their will. Yet when I try to join, to copy them, the tides do not ebb and the stars do not fall from the sky. Gravity flows on to its own accord. They do not seem surprised. They do not question me for it. I am their Gravis: perhaps it is my place to lead, their place to do. Perhaps it is simply not their place to question me.

So I sit alone in my throne room, marvel at how my subjects could pull such a vast chamber from the rocks before my eyes, wait for the news of the battle. Wonder how long it will sate them, before their desires move me again.

Alone. And yet . . .

Is that something before me in the darkness? Some dark shape that should not be? It falls like a shadow just on the corner of my eye --

except there should be no corner of my eye: my subjects see all around themselves, antennae twitching out every detail. Why not me? I try twitching, and yet there is nothing. There are still shadows into which my eyes will not penetrate, still corners where there should be none. So instead, I speak.

'Who is there?'

The question was not spoken out loud: it slid into the blur between my mind and theirs. The Tractators do not use sound: that is the muddied communication of the enemy. And nobody need talk to their enemies. And yet . . .

'Do you know who I am?' the response was spoken, purred out into the darkness.

And of course I knew. I knew without thinking who it must be, this shadow that was not my people. Despite the itch in the back of my skull, the friction that grew as memory and thought tried to combine to breed recollection. I knew who it must be.

'You are the enemy,' I replied, using my voice for the first time in what seemed like .

'You are the enemy, and my people will destroy you.'

All that echoed back was a dry, silken laugh.

'Do you even know who you are?' the shadow chuckled.

And I did not reply.

But the shadow, the shadow did. Its laughter wound itself up tight, until all that could escape was a single hiss, a cat-call of breath. And buried within it, a single word.

'Kamelion.'

Just that, and nothing more.

It was enough.

You can't trust it, Doctor.

I see it through a mist. I see the room, the white womb enfolding its soothing arms around me. I am not there, but I see it, through the mist. And I see the human, the bright, loud, sparking human saying that about me. I see her saying it, and I know I was there, once. Before I was here. Before I was Gravis. When I was Kamelion. I see her saying it, and I know that it is true. He cannot trust me, he who can do nothing but trust. I am a pawn, I am a puppet, and I dance for whoever pulls my strings. I wanted to know who I am, and now I do. I am everyone. I am no-one. I am nothing.

And yet he still takes me in. I see him, I watch him chastise her, and I say nothing. Because he is in me. No matter that he thinks he isn't, no

matter that he does not try, I leech onto him and drain every last drop of his desires from him. He desires she believe I can be trusted. He desires I can be given a chance. He desires that I deserve a chance. And so, to sate his desires, I can, and I do.

But then it grows difficult. He desires that I become my own person. I have no choice but to obey his desires, and ignore his desires. And so I hide -- deep in the heart of . . . something else. And there I find .. .

I see myself there, surrounded in the mist, and feel the heat in the back of my heart as something strains to remind me, at the cost of its own life. But I see myself there, surrounded by someone else, and I know that I have found some*thing* else. Something bigger than the thousand petty masters who have whipped and torn my desires this way and that. Something that has no desires of its own, and yet has the strength to protect me, to teach me to be like itself without simply being itself. To be *my*self, to know what that is. It is a joy to me to feel that link, that bond with that something. It is despair to not feel it now.

I would cry, but the eyes of a Gravis were not made for crying.

I see myself there, through the mist, and I see the mist clear. I remember. I remember the one thing I would wish to forget, were my wishes the desires I could fulfil. I remember one moment the something was there -- all-powerful, all-embracing -- and then I remember the next moment, feeling it being torn apart by a force greater than itself. I felt its pain, its fear as it felt itself slipping away, pulled until it could stretch no more. As I felt it die, I realised the same thing was happening to me.

I was so used to being powerless in another's grasp, I hadn't even felt it happen, again.

In an instant, the attack is over. My people put their thoughts to me again, rather than the enemy: I am whole again under their scrutiny. Kamelion is dead. There is only the Gravis.

And yet . . . There is a dark shadow in my mind that twists and turns as I try to hold it up to the light. They do not see it, my shuffling people, even though they are in my mind. Even though they are my mind. They feed me with their desires, inject me with identity, and then gorge themselves on my will. But my will is their will, reflected back, the

serpent's tail held in the serpent's own mouth. How long can we feed each other like this, how long will we remain sated?

'You are weak, Kamelion,' the shadow whispers, unheard. 'You will obey me.'

But now my people are here, my proud, victorious people. They dance around me, praising my leadership, praising my drive. They tell me, in each little movement, how the enemy suffered, how victory is nearly ours, how it will be as I demand. And still they feed me: the desire to strike the enemy; the desire to escape their prison; the desire for me to lead them. All feed me. All fill me, define me until I have no choice but be what they will: their leader. Their Gravis.

'And how long have you held this exultant position, my dear Gravis?' the shadow asks me, and I catch its smile: predatory, white, sharp.

I do not answer. I do not need to answer: I am Gravis and I do not talk to my enemies. I am Gravis, and have always been. Except when I was not. Except when I was in the --

fizz, spark, burn

- the other place that I was in, when I was Kamelion and I was myself. Myself without a thousand other personalities bubbling and raging in my mind, each threatening to prevail, each threatening to be me. But that was long ago. I cannot remember how long ago, and that is my proof: the memories are dusty and grey, and strain when they are brought out into the light. They must be old, because they come so slowly.

And yet the shadow chuckles in my mind, and I feel my people grow worried. They shuffle nervously, and I barely notice. I feel the shadow spread in my mind, blocking thoughts of Gravis and Kamelion. Blocking everything but . . . I feel myself shimmer, my carapace blurring into silver. And I fight, fight to maintain Kamelion, fight to maintain Gravis, anything but what threatens to become. But my people do not help -- they do not recognise this silver puppet before them -- and myself, I am not strong.

And throughout it all, the shadow wills and urges and spreads. And laughs.

'I am the Master,' it laughs, 'and you will obey me.'

And then -- finally -- I stand before them. I do not need to see myself to know my suit is dark, and my hair black as sin. I do not need to see myself to know I survey them with cold, dark eyes. I just know. As I know I was a fool to resist, as I know it was pathetic to be afraid of becoming. Just as I look down on the Tractators -- *my people* -- and see them just for what they are. A powerful resource, ready to be exploited. An army waiting to fight. My army.

And yet, there is a part of me that knows who I am. I am Kamelion, and I am a slave to the desires of others. I have no strength of my own, no power to fight, and yet I would not be slave to this creature, this Master. I was a king, I was a Gravis. I performed my duties, I fulfilled my people's desires, and I did no harm. I was their king longer than I remember, and had I the choice, I would be so again. There is, deep inside, a part of me that will resist until I die.

And so I hear myself speak, and know it is not my voice. And know the voice does this purely for my benefit.

'Come, will you not praise me?' the Master purrs, settling into a throne designed for another body. 'I am your Gravis, and you will obey me.'

'You are not our Gravis,' I hear the voice in my head, and some small, impotent part of myself swells with pride.

'Such loyalty, such devotion. Tell me, how long did you serve your Gravis.'

And though I have no care to hear the answer, somehow it is all I must hear. I burn with desire to know, am chilled by not caring at all.

'Two days,' is the reply, and some small part of me dies.

The way they tell it chills me to the bone, and at the same time lights fires of delight deep within. The story of how they destroyed the enemy's vessel -- striking it with asteroids, rending it with gravity. How they destroyed me, tearing me limb from limb. They will learn that I am hard to kill. Even as I lay scattered within the tunnels of their kingdom, I did not die. I merely waited, dormant, for somebody to find me. To save me.

(My master sneers, somewhere else. The very thought of relying on another's aid is alien to him, as his tar-like hatred is alien to me. Yet is

me, too.)

They came soon after, shuffling through chambers and caverns on some other's missions, and found me. Found the pieces of me, scattered in darkness. And, though I looked like their enemy, they knew somehow that I was not. They knew that I was technology -- precious technology to be salvaged, utilised, enslaved. (Here my master smiles: this is more familiar. The weak obey the strong. Aid is extorted, not begged for.) They knew I should be repaired, but had not expected what would come next.

Their bodies danced, and creation obeyed. The smallest parts of me were tugged and torn and knit together in ways I cannot even begin to understand. Slowly, I was reborn. And yet . . . They knew how I should look: my silver body echoed the enemy's, and they had made careful study of that, dissecting flesh with the precise pull of gravity. Outwardly, I am whole, I am myself again. But my insides are not as the enemy's. Transistor and diode are not heart and soul. Inside, I am a shadow, weak, insubstantial. With only the coming of darkness, I will disappear, enveloped.

I am weak, and the darkness is so very strong.

You are a fool, the darkness, my Master, tells me. I do not argue, cannot argue.

It is plain to see what has happened here. Were I not such a blinkered, weak-minded fool I would have seen it for myself. My people are not strong: they are no match for a superior mind. They have no burning will of their own, instead are simply puppets of a stronger mind. All they desire is a Gravis to lead them, a desire I easily fulfilled the second I was reactivated. As soon as they saw me, their thoughts of a silver enemy machine were forgotten, subdued by the need to be led. And lead I shall: to my rightful place as the ruler of solar systems, and eater of worlds.

And if some part of me feels sympathy, pities those enslaved by a stronger will, then that part is weak and foolish and will hold no sway here. The desire for the defeat of the enemy, the escape from this barren world, these were obviously channelled into me from their true Gravis. He is the only one with the power to stand in my way, and so

he is the first that must be defeated. With him destroyed, the Tractators would hear no other voice but mine, fight no other battles but those my master decreed necessary.

An army waiting to be led. But first there are more important matters to attend to.

'There is an enemy here,' I hear myself spit. 'The Doctor. You have deprived him of his TARDIS, but that is not enough. He'd find a way to escape, some day. You will bring him to me and, when he knows it is my hands that have settled around his neck, you will destroy him.'

And somehow, this is good, this is right.

And somehow, my people resist. They do not obey. They do not obey!

'I am the Master,' I snarl, 'and you will do my bidding.'

Still, nothing.

'Obey me!'

'We obey our Gravis. Our Gravis would have the enemy enslaved. Our Gravis will lead us away from this world. You will obey us.'

A chuckle: even in defiance, my people can still provide amusement. But defiance will not be tolerated. (Remember that, my Kamelion, remember.) Were they not to prove useful, were they not the teeth in my trap ... One day they will outlive their usefulness, and I shall remember this day. And they shall rue it, before they die. But for now, for now if it is a Gravis they want, it is a Gravis they shall have. (Obey me, my slave.)

And again my flesh shimmers and dances, blisters and expands. Dark cloth ripples into hard armour, silken hair bristles into twitching antennae. In a matter of seconds, my master's dark form is replaced by the towering insect Gravis. And my poor weak-minded subjects haven't even the wit to wonder how. Instead, they simply accept, mentally prostrating themselves before their acknowledged leader. They beg to be led, and they will obey.

Already I feel their desires flow into me, the blazing reflection of their real leader's will. A will so powerful it has dragged this pathetic insect race out of their burrows and across galaxies, decimating all in their path. A will so powerful it burns like a star, rushing into me, rushing through me, cleansing me. No! A will so powerful it dwarfs the

darkness -- that weakened, twisted will -- its light burning it away second by second.

Yes.

'Lead us, Gravis, lead us,' my people beg, without words.

And I look at them with pride, my people, my proud warriors. And I listen to them, would hear the will that moves us both, that must be obeyed. That I am happy to obey, because as I feel its pull now, it urges me on to a desire that is not from without. For the first time since my creation, I am duty bound to fulfil a desire that is as much mine as my master's. Memory no longer sparks and burns, as another's knowledge melts in to fill the gaps in my own. I look to my people proudly, and would smile, were the face of a Gravis made for smiling.

'Find me a TARDIS,' I order, and they obey.

The search does not take long, which relieves me. Even as the reflections of the Gravis' will move me on, the darkness rages and spits in my ear. It does not like being bested, especially by its own mistakes, especially by its own slaves. That dark anger gives power to its thoughts, and even at the heart of my people, I feel it pull me. Before they came back to me, I could feel myself shimmer and fade. (I am the Master and you *will* obey me!) But come back they did, bearing proud news of their search.

'We have found you a TARDIS,' they tell me.

'Take me to it,' I order, and they obey.

(You will obey me, Kamelion!)

The journey itself does not take long. I feel something akin to hope as I follow my followers, thrilling that the TARDIS should have been so near, light years beyond my reach as I lay mercy to a thousand whims and fantasies. But that still is buried beneath the overwhelming desire that I will possess the time ship, that I will free my people from their imprisonment and continue our conquest throughout history itself. And if some part of me prays that once I am inside those cool white walls again, the gnawing voices will dissipate and I shall be me again? I hear nothing but the burning desire of my Gravis, my people, and the insistent threats of the darkness.

So no, the journey itself did not take long, but the destination was a

surprise to all of us.

'Here it is, Gravis,' my people tell me, and I look. And I look, and I...

They have brought me into a tunnel, much like the others of their burrow, only yards from my throne room. And yet something is different. One edge of the tunnel, one drop of its curving miles, is not smooth, carved stone. It is not a dull earth brown, like its partners. It is a lighter shade of cream, dotted here and there with dark grey circles, embedded into the walls. It is only a few feet across, but my people are correct: it is the wall of a TARDIS.

'Lead us,' my people say, my desires sated.

'Obey me,' says the darkness, held at bay.

Myself, I say nothing.

The desire is still burning through me, strong enough (just strong enough) to keep the darkness from my mind. I must possess the TARDIS. And here it is, all that remains of her. I brush against the smooth, dead wall, and feel nothing of the electric vibrancy that was there before. There are desires that even I cannot satisfy: no matter how I rend and melt I cannot become a TARDIS. The infinite regression of room within room, of corridors linked to each other in a Morbius strip of possibilities: the simple twist of DNA is nothing to that.

I stand, leaning against this wall, filled with the urge to possess, wracked by the knowledge it is impossible. My people begin to doubt, and as their belief falters, the darkness surges forward. It is my master, and I must obey it. There is nothing else for a will-less slave to do. I can already feel my body morph and shift, see chitin fade into cloth and flesh. I can feel my desires shift, the urge to dominate, to prevail beginning to swell within me.

I can feel the Master rising up to claim me.

And suddenly, I can feel the universe shift to draw me into it. I can see the wall before me begin to shake and move, and glow --as if merely by the semblance of motion it could be reborn to life. And though the dark desires rise up within me, a desire that it something else -- someone's I do not recognise -- fights it down and bids me cling. I grasp the wall with hands that are half flesh, half silvered metal and reality steps aside to let us pass.

The last I see of my people is as they chitter and claw as their Gravis is pulled away from them on a wave of gravity.

I find myself once again within the cool white walls of the TARDIS. It is not as before.

I had been fooling myself, I knew now. These white walls were no haven. They could offer me no freedom. They were simply another prison, and one from which I must escape. But I could not escape alone. There was a burning will driving itself through my being, a will that had dominated an entire race, but which now could only find me to be its sole servant. It was stronger than anything I had ever felt before, and it was focussed on me.

My form dissolved away into a new shape, the shape of a good servant, and I obeyed my master's desires. Come to me. Save me.

The journey was short, and I made it without seeing. All there was was that single voice pulling me towards it, through corridor and corridor. I saw no other, felt no other voice, simply followed. Until I was in the room, the new prison that held me. My master was on the floor, every last drop of his energy spent, his antennae drooped and lifeless. But somewhere inside, his willed burnt more fiercely that it ever had.

'Lead me, Gravis,' I said, without words.

'I have been tricked,' it told me, its voice blasting through my head, shaking loose everything in its way. Even the darkness was silenced, this once. 'You are all I have left. You will save me.'

'Lead me, Gravis,' I begged.

Its eyes held me, and I saw within. Saw a broken ruler, a puppet with its strings severed, as alone without followers as its people were without a leader. I saw myself in its eyes, and pitied it.

'I have been tricked,' it repeated. 'You will save me. My strength is gone, but you are strong. Do as I say, and I will make you a king. You will lead, you will rule.'

But I could do nothing but beg again:

'Lead me, Gravis.'

'Tear this trap apart. Destroy this TARDIS. Now.'

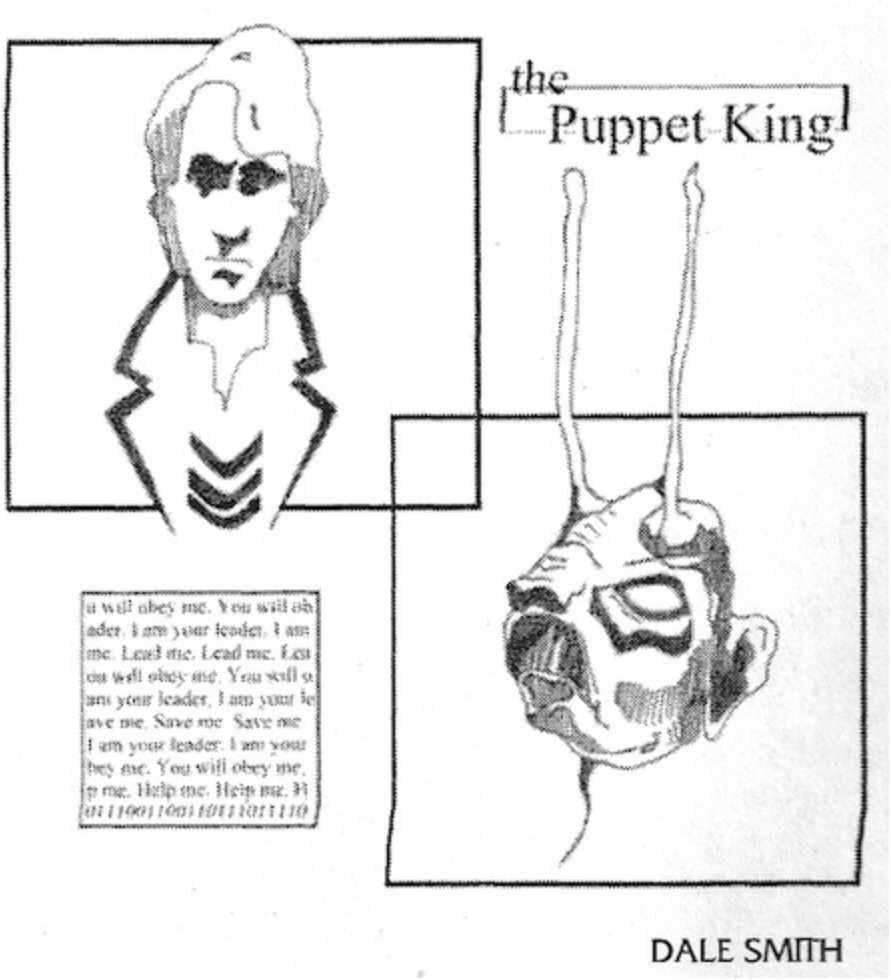
And though I pleaded and begged, danced and fought, gravity would not obey me as he demanded it should. The TARDIS sailed on

unhindered, and the Gravis remained, a prisoner.

When the Doctor found me some moments later, he saw only a battered silver statue, staring immobile at the deposed king. I did not speak to him, and he did not speak to me. Instead, in silence, he pulled the Gravis onto a wheeled bed and pushed him from the room. Pushed him down the corridors, through rooms within rooms and on until that burning will was no longer in my mind. Until I was free of it and could move again.

He did not speak of it again -- perhaps unwilling to let his companions hear of it, lest they realise -- but this did not please me. No-one desired that it should, and so it was not so. Instead I retired deep into the heart of the TARDIS, not to explore, not to thrill again in lightning conversations with that great soothing mind, but instead to hide. I did not want them to see me, any of them to see me, but especially not him. I was afraid of what he would see as my body shifts and blurs.

Because deep inside, I hear a voice. I am the Master, it tells me, and you will obey me. Eventually.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Tea With Cthulhu

LARS PEARSON

Five Hours from Now

The Abomination calmly juggled the Doctor's life in one hand and Chris' life in the other, forcing its two prizes to jump through the air faster and faster with a talent unknown to this Universe. The monster dared to add torches to the mix, as though the main attraction of some common circus, almost scorching the two lives with a spectral flame.

The Abomination turned to Roz and ordered, 'You will decide between their lives. Now.'

As Roz clenched her bruised ribs, precious time slid away from her. Her own heart demanded, *SAVE CHRIS! For he destroys the darkness within your soul.*

THE DOCTOR! her head countered. *Time's Champion! You can't balance the Doctor with the lives of two Adjudicators!*

Chris! her gut commanded. *The Doctor!* her brain shot back. *Chris! The Doctor! Chris! The Doctor!*

The Abomination juggled faster.

Roz made her choice.

She stepped forward and reached out.

Now (Doctor's relative perspective)

The moment the Doctor asked, 'I need a favour. From both you and Chris,' Roz should have run in the opposite direction.

She should have thrown herself under the nearest fast-moving stunnel transport, or something equally dramatic. But always the consummate professional, she raised one eyebrow and said, 'You're asking us? Not telling us, not forcing? All right, who are you and what have you done with the Doctor?'

'Ah,' the Doctor clenched his umbrella a bit tighter. 'Yes...it happens that this time, I don't have the right to order you.'

Goddess, *that* sent Roz's jaw through the floor. She closed her mouth and lit a cigarette, considering it a harmless way to milk the moment. She took a delicious puff and nodded, 'Continue.'

'I need...an artefact retrieved,' the Doctor elaborated. 'It was originally part of a small settlement of people from Titan - a reclusive colony of telepaths who linked themselves in a mental gestalt, thereby eliminating their murderous negative impulses.'

The cigarette flared as Roz took another drag. 'Oh? Did it work?'

'For a time. But you wouldn't have liked them much.'

'Why?'

'Because you'd have no reason to backhand someone into submission and grind your boot into their face.'

Roz nodded. 'Agreed. Continue.'

The Doctor sighed and rolled his eyes. 'Unfortunately, the gestalt didn't eliminate the populace's hostile instincts - it merely rerouted them through an organic filter. A philosophical and metaphysical liver, screening out the people's toxins and poisons. They called this filter "The Memoriter."'

Roz said, blinking, 'Adjudicator armour doesn't come equipped with dictionaries, Doctor.'

'It's a euphemism. It means...' the Doctor appeared flummoxed, 'Errr...how shall I say this? Well...the Memoriter kept its society beating. It was the second of its kind, operating just before the Embodiment of Gris levelled the settlement.

'But right before the end, a group of Mother Earth cultists spirited the Memoriter away to a planetoid near Vanderdeken's Star. Gala-worshippers, I'm told. Very low-level fanatics. Shouldn't give you any trouble.' He handed over a file. 'Diagrams and reconnaissance photos, supplied by one of my informants, the Marquis.'

Roz concurred. This didn't look tough.

The Doctor's grey eyes looked at her. 'Roz, I can't force your involvement in this instance. I'd go on my own, but I'm bound from acting.'

Roz wondered if the TARDIS could manufacture eucalyptus leaf cigarettes. Why?'

'Rules.'

Roz halted mid-puff and deadpanned, 'Rules never concerned you before.'

'This is different. There are lines even I daren't cross, at the cost of my souls, or worse, my sanity. I was told to get the artefact, but also to stay away from it. For once, I'm taking orders.'

'From who?'

The little man gripped his umbrella tighter. 'Me. Or rather, my future self. A humour-filled rogue with unruly red hair, I'm told, who's sometimes known as 'Merlin.' Although he prefers just 'Doctor.'

Roz shrugged. 'This, of course, surprises nobody.'

'Indeed. I sent me a note with these instructions.'

There was a pregnant pause, then the Doctor focused with razor sharpness, his voice taking on a new baritone depth. 'Roz, listen very carefully. There are no wailing mothers or children or patriot dead at stake here, no civilizations on the cusp of despair. This time...' he paused again, and his eyes further turned the colour of steel, '...this time, it's only my life, well-being and happiness at stake. Nothing more.'

Roz looked the Doctor in the eye and said with conviction, 'Consider it done.'

The Doctor pursed his lips and said, 'Thank you.' He paused, then added, 'Roz, how is it I trust you so much...even more than I trusted Ace...or Bernice?'

'Because you always know where you stand with me. I represent the candid, on-the-table desire to pound the shit out of whatever's standing in your way - you're a man of peace, Doctor, but violence sometimes solves problems.' Now *that* was a non-Benny riff if ever she'd heard one.

'Things used to be...simpler,' the Doctor reluctantly sighed. 'I worry that the Universe has changed, become more visceral. I used to travel through it in a wild, rich and tax-free manner. Now, I leave the room for a second and return to find one of my friends' bloody, severed limbs amid a pile of corpses.'

He turned to leave, then said, 'The Marquis has supplied a high-speed boat to take you to the cult's temple. You...will use non-lethal

force, please?'

'Of course,' Roz said, which was precisely the answer she didn't give later when Chris asked, 'So, who do you want me to kill?'

Now

The Marquis basked in the steam of the TARDIS sauna room, then commented, 'Chris, do you have any idea how terrifying your particular little band is?'

Chris observed that the man seated with him had black skin and dreadlocks, and had entered wearing a long, dark leather coat that covered his multiple layers of clothes.

He'd introduced himself as the Marquis ('Just the Marquis.' he'd added to Chris.) 'Your travelling partner pretentiously calls himself *the Doctor*, and you dare to imply simple titles aren't adequate?'). He gave the Doctor information, representing an organization that objectively protected causality and insured the Universe didn't end in a howling heat death. In short, the Marquis' people happily let the Doctor and his ilk rewrite the play that was the Universe, but insured everyone was onstage to answer their cues.

'Terrifying?' Chris replied. 'Errr...I never thought of it like that.'

'You should.' The Marquis fished a body-riddled photo from his hanging coat. 'Consider, if you will, these rotting corpses. Terror and death wrought by creatures that survived from the universe before this one.'

'We call them the Great Old Ones. They have staggering cosmic powers, each of them a painter's pallet of unspeakable death. And yet...and yet...*your* renegade Time Lord routinely defeats them, rallying assistants such as a horny Dalek killer and an archaeologist with faked credentials who excavates her hip flask.' Almost as an afterthought, the Marquis added, 'Not to mention Roz Forrester and her squire, Christopher Cwej. Two space cops - Adjudicators, you call yourselves - on the run for crimes you didn't commit.'

Chris frowned. 'C'mon. We're not *that* dangerous.'

'Dangerous?' grinned the Marquis. 'The second your Doctor walks into the room, monsters who've slaughtered nations shove their heads

into guillotines and yell, *Pull!* I must spend 40 percent of my time mopping up after this incarnation, never mind his other selves.'

'Yeah, but c'mon...the Doctor sometimes does bad things, but he's not that deadly.'

'Chris,' the Marquis passionately said, 'I find myself in the strange position of regarding him as a blood brother, but do you honestly think two of the previous Doctors combined would stand a chance against *your Doctor*? His own asses would be grass and he'd be the weed trimmer.'

Chris knew he shouldn't ask the next question. 'If you're a continuity cop, err... do you know what happens to Roz and I?'

'No,' the Marquis replied, yet his body language screamed, *Yes.* He changed the subject with, 'The Doctor's probably done speaking with Roz now. Wash up.' And then he *almost* sighed. 'They'll need you in full armour shortly.'

Now

An hour later, Chris and Roz were suited in their blue and gold Adjudicator armour and on the shoreline by the TARDIS, ready to leave. The sky grew dark, so the Doctor offered his question-mark umbrella. Roz declined, saying it was only a bit of rain, but kept to herself the jokey comment, 'And anyway, umbrellas are for pussies.' Then she and Chris set out.

Now

The Marquis made tea in the TARDIS' cafeteria while the Doctor sadly related recent events. Since the TARDIS crew's recent battle with the Carnival Queen, the Doctor had tracked leads on the psionic Brotherhood, discovering two of his friends had met with grisly ends.

One, a little Earth priest with a Beatles haircut and a gift for precognition, died when a lighting rod fell, skewering him through the chest. The second was a handsome convict at the Fiorina 'Fury' 161 penal colony. From what the Doctor pieced together (quite literally), a dog-looking alien had hauled his mentally unhinged friend - straightjacket and all - into the ventilation system and ripped him to

shreds.

The Marquis offered the Doctor some Earl Grey tea and the Doctor off-handedly asked, 'Do you remember the time I ordered us to run between two approaching Greek phalanxes?' The Doctor smiled, 'It's a fond memory, proof that you're sometimes safer staring down a gun barrel than trying to dodge.'

The Marquis checked his pocket watch. 'Speaking of that,' he added, his voice tinged with regret, 'this is for you.' And he pulled from his coat a small red canister with a question-mark logo from his coat.

The Doctor eyeballed it. 'What's this?'

The Marquis' eyelids lowered slightly. 'If s from the you-to-be. It's from Merlin.'

'You already gave me a message from Merlin.'

'Very astute,' said the Marquis. 'But this is a second. According to causality, you weren't meant to have it until now.'

The canister contained no more than two scraps of paper. The Doctor read the first one aloud with rare diction: '*Ph'nglui mglw 'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*.'

'Very pretty,' said the Marquis. 'I trust it's more than the epileptic scrawling of a lobotomy patient.'

The Doctor nodded, with mounting dread. 'It's taken from H.P. Lovecraft. It means, "In his house at R'lyeh dead, Cthulhu waits dreaming."'

The second piece of paper contained only one word - a name that made the Doctor fall silent. Despite millennia of death fights, cutthroat encounters, conversations with angels and more, the Marquis shivered - because the Doctor was frightened.

No, you don't understand. The Doctor *was frightened*.

'It's a trap,' the Doctor said in abject horror, his respiratory bypass system failing him. 'Roz and Chris have walked into a trap. The Sword of Damocles has fallen.'

Now

Chris and Roz parked the Marquis' boat near an outcropping and made their way on foot. For a harrowing 27 minutes (harrowing because they

saw nothing and nobody), they observed the cult's stone temple, a Greek iconic arrangement covered with alien symbols. Not seeing any mirrors, Chris cocked his two pulse pistols, glad for the chance of laser combat because it looked cool. For 12 minutes, they tread the temple's main passageway, checking empty rooms and wondering where the cultists were. Everything went swimmingly.

But 4 minutes later, a meter on Chris' armour spiked. 'Roz, I'm getting a vibe.'

'I've got it,' said Roz. Then her seismograph spiked off the scale and she instinctively dodged and rolled - an action that saved her life.

The creatures that burst through the concrete walls around them were once men - perhaps. Their skin held the bluish tinge of the dead, even if their hands had morphed into elongated claws strong enough to easily rend Adjudicator armour.

'Animated corpses,' hissed Roz. 'Damn you, Doctor.'

Now

The Doctor turned suddenly, wracked with disgust. 'What game am I...is *Merlin* playing at?'

'Give me a moment,' said the Marquis. 'I'll take my brain out and put Merlin's in.' He rolled his eyes upward. 'No, no, I still don't know what he's thinking.'

The Doctor clenched his knuckles. 'How long have Roz and Chris been gone? No, don't answer that.' He glanced into himself. 'Three hours, 11 minutes, 27 seconds.' He rounded on the Marquis. 'You had Merlin's second capsule all this time...and let me send Roz and Chris into...*into that? Why?*'

The Marquis shrugged. 'Again, by the rules of causality, you weren't supposed to get that note until now.' He crossed his arms. 'Also, I don't speak for Merlin's intent on teaching you about manipulation, but it burns, doesn't it, Doctor? And *as your friend*, I'm advising you remember that lesson in future.'

The Time Lord frowned. 'You shouldn't be telling me this, damn you.'

The Marquis solemnly spread his fingers. 'I've seen my future death and know it to be without merit. From my point-of-view, secrets are

pointless.'

The Doctor nodded, calmed down, then said, 'Marquis...old friend...you can't help further, and I can't guarantee your safety from here. Go home.'

The Marquis nodded and rose. 'Understood...and appreciated.'

At the doorway, the Doctor stopped as if he'd just become very, very tired. 'I am about to match unspeakable horror gaze for gaze and have very little going for me,' he whispered.

The Marquis quietly asked, 'And what do you have going for you?'

'Brains,' the Doctor replied. 'And gall. Put the two together and anything is possible.'

Now

There's a point in combat where the body takes over, when the opponents react from little more than their physical memory. Weeks afterward, Chris barely remembered holstering his pulse pistols and fishing two hand revolvers from his boots. He'd loaded them with hollow-tipped bullets, the exceptionally vicious sort which explode on impact.

He planted both feet, crossed his arms and let fly both a scream and hot lead. The bullets blasted hunks of flesh out of his undead attackers, decimating them even as the newly 'wounded' crawled forward. Conversely Roz couldn't hit the side of a barn with a moonbeam, so she clenched the shoulder of the nearest corpse, tore its arm off with her armour's augmented strength and proceeded to beat her attackers with it.

Chris charged into a corner, his armour's Airwalker Boots neutralizing gravity just enough so his momentum let him run up the wall, round the corner and blaze down the other side, bullets pumping out wave after wave of carnage. Roz dismembered and decapitated her enemies with well-placed jabs, even her armoured elbows devastating with the tensile strength of piledrivers. And the corpses surged forward.

Now

The Doctor stood in the TARDIS' Domino Room, clenching his umbrella between marble-white knuckles.

The Domino Room...well, it was little more than a large white space, about 50 yards long and 30 yards tall, covered with thousands upon thousands of dominoes winding through multiple levels and dimensions. It took him five lifetimes to achieve it. The Doctor's third incarnation originally used the room to whittle away his Earth exile, stacking the dominoes to form a giant sundial. Subsequent Doctors had continued the tradition, although they'd variously patterned the dominoes, made from dozens of different materials, into a giant Caduceus, a vibrant flower and (quite bizarrely) a small puppy. One Doctor helpfully added time locks, sealing the dominoes in place when turbulence or the odd alien invasion buffeted the TARDIS.

Yet, the Doctor's current incarnation had modified the Domino patterns to serve a purpose much more practical - and sinister. To wit, he'd weaved in an ancient code, one suitable for...a summoning.

For Merlin's scrap of paper held a single name: 'Nyarlothtep,' the name of a Great Old One whom the Doctor had prayed he'd never, ever encounter. If Nyarlothtep were present, Roz and Chris were as good as dead--meaning the Doctor could either pay a Universal price too horrible for even a Time Lord to contemplate, or he could abandon Roz and Chris, thereby preserving the Universal Order beyond a doubt.

The Doctor gripped his umbrella tighter, wishing the Marquis had stayed long enough to verbally whip him into action.

The Universal Order. Roz and Chris. The Universal Order. *Roz and Chris.*

There was a palpable, pulpy silence.

The Doctor's eyes opened with a wolverine-like menace that could have sliced steel. And in a voice that didn't seem his own, he commanded, 'Time locks off.'

Now

The corpses did their best, but the Adjudicators were absolute murder on wheels and the passageway quickly filled with zombie guts and carnal death. But sadly for Roz and Chris, one mistake made all the

difference.

Chris leapt up, Airwalker Boots keeping him aloft for a split second and allowing him to rain a fury of kicks on an approaching corpse. 'Pay!' he gleefully screamed, watching the creature's ribcage collapse. A heady euphoria washed through him as the monster imploded inward.

Unfortunately, Chris got greedy. His final kick smashed through the monster's chest like an iron bar through tissue paper.

And then Chris' leg got stuck - inside the monster's torso.

Chris suffered an instant of wide-eyed recognition as his whole body fell, literally pulling the creature's dead weight down with him. The corpses pressed home their attack, piling on top of him. Chris lashed out with his free limbs to devastate or decapitate four more of the creatures, but his leg remained pinned. The beasts lashed out with their claws, their body weight holding him down. He felt a surge of raw panic--Adjudicator calming techniques having never prepped him for an onslaught of rotting corpses.

'Roz! Roz!' he screamed, followed by a desperate and nonsensical cry of *'Doctor!'*

There was a brief slicing sensation - similar to dicing your finger with a paper cut - even as Roz's punches forced the creatures back. Strangely feeling lighter, a murky-headed Chris braced his elbows and back-pedalled away from the smouldering body pile. That shouldn't have been possible, considering his leg was still pinned, but...

Hold it. Red. He saw red. Where the hell was all the red coming from?

Chris' head oddly filled with cottonballs, but he propped up on his elbows and looked. His right leg - or everything of it from the knee down - was still in the corpse's torso. The creatures had cut it off.

Chris' eyeballs rolled back in his head, and with the verve of an animal in mortal terror, he screamed a final, defiant, 'ROZ!!!' and passed out, swearing he heard the thunderclap of riding Valkyries.

Now

The Doctor said, 'Time locks off,' then reared up with his question-mark

umbrella. A human eye might have sworn blind (so to speak) that nothing happened--for as the umbrella completed its arc, only quiet embraced the room.

But a split second later, the first domino, standing peacefully on a tier at chest level and brushed within mere microns by the Doctor's umbrella, toppled over.

Instantly, a row of dominos thudded downward, splitting into three chains that simultaneously wrapped themselves around the Room's exterior and flattened the outer domino levels with shocking speed.

On the Northern tier, a lead domino hit a pressure switch and roared blue flames to life, turning four rows of ice dominos into steam that whirled a pinwheel and continued the toppling motion on an upper level.

In the East, dynamite-laden dominoes exploded in sequence, triggering a chain reaction with a life all its own. To the South, dominoes made from Adamantium metal crashed over, the last one winking out of existence, cast down a miniscule space vortex that extended through a newborn star.

The West oddly remained untouched, with dozens of paper-made dominoes.

Up North, tiny 1970s motorcars, each of them bearing the license plate 'Who 7', fired to life and sideswiped 14 more domino rows into oblivion. In the South, biomechanoid dominoes resembling horses whinnied and loped along, eating up dominos made of sugar.

On the West side, the Adamantium domino pinged into existence out the tiny space eddy's opposite end, scorching with a star's heat that instantly roasted the paper dominoes and consequently butchering a good chunk of the Western section, spreading its chaos to the other quarters.

The Doctor's Gallifreyan forehead slicked with sweat beads just before the final act. The opening fanfare merely invoked the universal elements--fire, air, water, earth--all of them culminating in a crazed waltz of Brownian motion that channelled momentum into the summoning's most important pattern: 6,666 dominos made from invulnerable Inertron.

And then the Domino Room, all 1,500 square yards of it, achieved critical mass.

Imagine if you will *thousands* of invulnerable bricks succumbing to gravity and striking home, producing waves upon waves of ironclad staccatos that reinforce each other like the beating of 50 million butterfly wings. Or the thundering of hundreds of buffalo across a grassy field. Imagine that they patterned out a code, a universal signal flare recognized before the Dawn of Time.

Imagine you were the Doctor standing in the midst of this, your tiny telepathic signal turbo-charging itself through the Inertron chains' engineered havoc. And imagine if even your Gallifreyan eyes weren't equipped for the energy flash that resulted and you blinked to find yourself in...

The Vortex: Unreality

The Doctor left footprints in dark purple sand as he walked across an alien locale, barren but for the tea table.

Above, comet strikes blasted heavenly bodies to bits, showering the area near the Doctor with lumps the size of cows - yet it was mostly for show. A lot of things didn't matter on the astral plane, but his dining companion would appreciate the melodrama.

The Doctor had sculpted the locale with his admittedly limited psionic energy, magnified exponentially through the ley lines formed when the Inertron dominos toppled in the TARDIS, where his real body remained. The telepathic surge in the Domino Room lasted only for the briefest of instants, but it was enough.

His dining companion waited for him on the other side of the tea table. And if the English language were capable of describing the nature of what sat across from the Doctor, it would no longer be the English language.

It had a gelatinous, translucent mass too blobbish to resemble a man. An eldritch, green fire radiated from behind it, but the being's blackened form choked it off, like the moon blotting the life from the sun. It had tentacles that seethed with minds of their own, eager for blood and the bowels of babes.

If such a claim could be made, this was *the* Great Old One. The prophet who waited in his house at R'lyeh, sleeping until the stars came

into proper alignment and it could loose its fellows' magical shackles, hailing a Universal apocalypse. The Doctor had encountered this creature's subsidiaries, even its impersonators (most notably in Haiti) but he'd never truly met the Beast.

For if there were an Abhorrence of Nature, this was it.

Into this encounter walked the Doctor, who doffed his hat, then wondered if that was a bit rude, considering the Abhorrence didn't have a hat - let alone a head - to doff in response. And the Doctor said, 'Hello. I thought we should talk.'

He picked up a teapot and poured into mugs snug in Marvin the Martian tea cosies. He placed one across from the Abhorrence and said, 'Sugar? Lemon?' For lack of a response, he threw in four sugar lumps, imagining the Abhorrence preferred sugar rushes and bouncing off the walls.

'We seem to have reached an impasse,' said the Doctor, 'where mayhaps we might be of service to one another. For whereas we've philosophically been at odds - i.e. you want to break the Universe open like an old bone and suck out its very life marrow and I'm not so keen on the idea - there is an old saying that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And in this instance, I might provide you with certain information on the understanding that you'll act on it.' The Doctor raised an eyebrow to think. 'And perhaps one or two other conditions.'

It was the only time the Abhorrence spoke to him verbally, with the tone of your lover crying out in pain. No device could convert the phrase into English, but it roughly translated: 'How...steeled...is your mettle...Time Lord?'

The Doctor chuckled. 'Finely tempered,' he said, pouring the milk.

Now

Roz saw Chris go down and snapped, massaging her gauntlet controls well beyond safety limits, altering her body chemistry and slapping her adrenal gland into high gear.

A roar of power claimed her senses and damn near carried her off her feet as she abandoned meticulous fighting technique abandoned in favour of raw, bestial action. She ploughed through the remaining

corpses, scooped up Chris - sans one leg - and charged down the corridor as if all the demons in hell were after her.

Two minutes later, Roz burst into a central sanctum, moving fast but gritting her teeth. She hoisted Chris' dead weight onto a barren slab, ignoring how much it resembled a morgue, and fished out her laser knife.

She intoned aloud, 'Salamis. Insecticide. Fuchsia,' a code phrase she was unlikely to speak on accident, but which activated a potent yet potentially fatal (if used too often) Adjudicator mnemonic in her mind. She felt a brief orgasmic jolt as short-term medical knowledge electrically flooded her brain and she instantly went to work with the laser knife, cauterising Chris' leg stump where the armour's default settings had been inadequate and sealing every artery and vein with a surgeon-like precision. Then she switched the knife off and gaped for breath, absolutely covered in Chris' blood. Satisfied he'd survive if they got him back to the TARDIS, Roz slipped off her right glove and checked Chris' pulse.

And then, as she further looked at him, Roz experienced an instant.

Perhaps it was giddiness caused by the ebb of battle and the normalizing of her adrenaline. Perhaps it was the base need to cling to her humanity amidst the terror, or perhaps it was something more. But regardless, there was a crystallized nugget of time - one in which Roz' universe contracted until there was only her and Chris - with no Doctors or betrayals or sarcastic archaeologists or patriot dead bloated on the battlefield.

Roz, her bare hand already on Chris' neck, was silent as she softly spread her fingers and moved her hand up his cheek. Her breathing calmed but took on a different type of tension as she continued up his face, finally parting his blond hair with her bloody fingers, in a move of such grace and gentleness that it startled even her. She inwardly cursed herself for forgetting how beautiful he was and the instant cemented itself in time.

And then, with a roar that pierced millennia and could have gutted nations, an Abomination from beyond the Dawn of Time burst through the casket behind her.

Now

Roz instantly snapped to attention, shucking back on her combat gauntlet and whirling around in a blocking stance. Debris flew as the Abomination spawned from its casket like the birth of a new and terrifying god.

Her new opponent vaguely congealed itself into a nebulous, gelatinous mass that burned with a stabbing green flame. Its every pore suffused the air with a profuse terror as it lacquered itself with layer upon layer of ooze, sprouting and retracting an innumerable amount of limbs.

Roz shook her head, snatched up Chris and tried to flee. The Abomination blobbily lumbered after her, racing with quicksilver-like speed despite its lack of legs, and handily lapped her. Roz back-pedalled, leaping onto the slab soaked with Chris' blood, and held her ground as the Abomination circled dizzily and prevented her escape.

Grateful Chris was still unconscious, Roz braced herself for the fatal impact and whispered, 'Hell is having to say you're

There was a moment when reality blurred, as part of the Abomination's bulk split itself off into what vaguely looked like a man - a slightly balding man smoking a cigarette and clad in clothes that included a smoking jacket.

And even as the blobby majority of the Abomination suffused its colour and went dormant, its humanoid counterpart intoned, in an accent distinctly like Noel Coward (not that Roz knew who Noel Coward was), 'Ah, Roslyn Inyathi Forrester. Such a pleasure to meet you.'

The monster knew her name. And in turn, Roz knew true fear.

The Vortex: Unreality

The Doctor drank tea. He started with seven or nine rounds of traditional English Breakfast tea, but craved variety and began guzzling green teas - Genmaicha Green, Heavenly Gunpowder, Moroccan Mint and Strawberry Cream - before moving along to Estate Darjeeling, Formosa Oolong and Indian Assam. (He briefly recalled a cross-temporal meeting with Socrates, where he told the philosopher, 'Don't

drink too much or you'll fall on your Assam.')

He downed Russian Tea and Southern Iced Tea. He suffused himself with herbal mixes that included Lemon Chamomile Ginseng Peppermint, Carmel Rooitea and Carnival Mate, hoping they'd soothe an arthritic wrist injury he'd suffered by colliding with a fat first baseman at Wrigley Field during a baseline hit.

He tried Fruit Garden, Strawberry Kiwi and Grannie's Garden. Fearing the shakes and a tortured evening in bed with his eyes bulging like fried eggs, he switched to decaff and had Apricot Ceylon, Mandarin Spice and Tropical Passion. Just for kicks, he sampled Fragrant Night Jasmine and Jasmine Dragon Phoenix Pearl.

And, with the endurance of a fraternity brother, he positively chugged his personal favourite, Orange Blossom Oolong Tea. Actually, the taste was average, but he just loved saying the word 'Oolong.'

Now

'You...are Roslyn Inyathi Forrester, are you not?' the humanoid part of the Abomination repeated, taking a drag of its cigarette.

Roz forced her eyes open and burned the Abomination with a look that could have melted Inertron. 'Yes?' she spat through gritted teeth.

'I'm glad you're finally here,' said the Abomination. 'Are you comfortable up there? Cigarette?'

Roz's body *begged* for nicotine, but she shook her head. 'Errr...no. No. Goddess, are you one of the Great Old Ones? You...'

'Can form complete sentences?' considered the Abomination. 'I suppose you could say certain of my fellows contributed their experiences and power, resulting in something of an evolution on my part.'

Roz levelled a finger. 'Meaning you ate them.'

'Well...if you have to be vulgar about it.'

Roz felt tired. 'And who the hell are you?'

'I am...' the Noel Coward-like Abomination fumbled for words. 'Well, I suppose you could call me older than the Universe that gave birth to you. I am power beyond the vaguest whisper of your understanding, and yet I arranged for *you* to come here. I knew you'd come after the

Memoriter, so my followers spirited it away to this place.'

'*Censor* you,' Roz responded. 'I don't think it's me you want. If there's a bargain to be struck, you want to talk with the Doctor. On the cosmic scale of things,' it pained her to say, 'I'm little more than a loaded gun waiting to be pointed and fired.' She swallowed and added, 'Frankly, I know my place.'

'Oh, come now,' said Abomination, crossing its arms. 'It's possible for even a pawn to make its way across the board and morph into royalty.' It took a drag. 'Let me ask you this. Do you wish to live?'

'No,' Roz brazenly countered. 'Do you wish to die? Perhaps I can accommodate you. In case you didn't know,' and she hissed the last bit, '*Death is a woman.*'

The Abomination smiled, his sense of pompousness making Roz want to puke, and added, nodding at Chris' prone form. 'How about this one? Do you wish him to live?'

Roz fell curiously silent.

'I could kill you both in an instant, you know,' said the Abomination. 'But give me your consent, and you and the young one may go in peace.'

Roz didn't like being distinguished from Chris by her age, but let it pass. 'My consent for what?'

The Abomination shifted excitedly and leaned forward. 'To kill the Doctor.'

The Vortex: Unreality

The danger in converging with higher powers, you set, isn't so much in being exposed to their inhuman nature. The real threat lies in losing your own identity in the process. If you're going to light-heartedly chat with a higher power, you'd better mentally anchor yourself to your home reality. In other words, it's crucial you psionically linchpin yourself by performing an action that's as standard, reliable and consistent as possible.

Accordingly, the Doctor was grateful he'd chosen tea drinking rather than repeatedly levelling and brutalizing the Abhorrence with income and property taxes *ad nauseam*. ('I abhor filibuster,' his former self

once spoke in the U.S. Senate, then proceeded to recite aloud apple dumpling recipes.)

So the Doctor drank and ate enough for a RAF squadron, comfortable in the knowledge that bladders mean little on the astral plane. The Abhorrence, by contrast, didn't touch its Princess Diana commemorative tea set and rather rudely left its buttered scones untouched.

'Not much of a tea-taking entity?' the Doctor inquired. 'Tsk-tsk. How distinctly un-British of you. If you like, we could switch to margaritas. It doesn't do much for my biochemistry, but I could manifest a New Orleans-style five-gallon bucket loaded with booze and ringed at the top with salt for you to barbarically slurp down through a frond.'

The Abhorrence warbled gibberish in response.

'No?' said the Doctor. 'Well, your loss.'

And then the Doctor did something truly impulsive. He switched to a truly evil and potent Long Island Iced Tea, feeling it spur hair growth on his chest.

Now

Suddenly, Roz understood the reason for the zombie attack - the Abomination wanted her tired and pliable enough to agree with his proposal, however cracked it might be.

Nonetheless, she thought about laughing. Oh, what the hell, she *did* laugh - a wonderful organic laugh that took on a life of its own. 'Kill the Doctor? By all means, try. May whatever gods you worship have mercy, because the Doctor certainly won't.'

'Let me tell you something,' the Abomination said, seating itself on another cement slab and tapping its cigarette. 'Centuries ago, the Doctor imprisoned me. The details aren't important, but suffice to say, even powerful as I am, I'm governed by Rules. Universal compacts and limitations that,' and it cleared its throat, 'bind me from slaying or causing harm to the one who imprisoned me.'

'Meaning you can't kill the Doctor without shafting yourself.'

' …Yes,' conceded the Abomination.

'Good,' said Roz. 'Fuck you running.'

'But,' said the Abomination, crossing its legs and taking another puff, 'I'm allowed to ignore such rules if the stars are in proper convergence.' And it glanced up at this, 'And, more important, if I forge a bargain with one whom the Doctor has grievously wronged.'

Blood pumped through Roz's veins. She didn't like the way this conversation was proceeding.

'Let's say there was someone the Doctor had killed,' continued the Abomination. 'If the kin of such a person were standing...say, where you are standing...and if that being gave me consent...why, I could circumvent the Rules and stalk the Time Lord. I could pick him apart, chromosome by chromosome, until his fetid remains were ready to be funnelled into a bucket.'

'Really,' deadpanned Roz.

'Yes.'

'Ah.'

'Indeed.'

'How splendid for you,' said Roz. 'Go screw yourself.'

There was a pregnant pause. Then the Abomination calmly added, smoke pouring out its nostrils, 'Roslyn Inyathi Forrester.'

'Yes?' Roz replied.

The other shoe dropped. 'He did kill one of your blood.'

The Vortex: Unreality

In unreality, the Doctor polished off his 12th piece of Chocolate Espresso Cheesecake. 'Now then, this bit is rather crucial,' he told the Abhorrence, 'If you ignore everything else I'm telling you, pay attention here.

'When making lemon meringue pie, always use duck eggs for your meringue. It'll turn out three times as fluffy. Remember: Don't use chicken eggs or you're doomed.'

The Abhorrence stared forward, illuminated by a light that bespoke of plague and drowned puppies.

Now

Despite herself, Roz twitched.

She loathed herself for even that lack of control. So she stood up, bore her gaze directly into the Abomination's eyes, and uttered a two-word phrase that was decidedly unbecoming of an Adjudicator. The Abomination remained unabashed. But the insult released some tension, so Roz unleashed a comment filthier than the first. Again, the Abomination looked on blankly. It was like arguing with a goldfish.

Finally, Roz clenched her fists. 'Elaborate. Now.'

'Allow me to use plain English. The Doctor killed your brother.'

'I don't have a brother.'

'You don't anymore.'

Roz froze. She had nothing, *not a shred of proof*, to substantiate the Abomination's claims. But on an intrinsic level, she *knew* it was the truth.

The Abomination calmly continued, 'It was a battle on Arcturus Five, one that involved a space rift and millions, both in terms of lives and collateral property. The Doctor sacrificed your brother to the temporal fissure, sealing it, but retroactively erasing your brother's existence. The Rules graciously consider you a grievously injured party.'

Roz damn near reeled and pondered going down on one knee to avoid passing out. Would that question-marked, diction-challenged bastard toss her brother off the playing board and *not even tell her about it?* Yes, she realized. Damn that little shit, he would. He'd probably done far worse, figuring she was too mortal to complete the puzzle.

She was silent as the Abomination added, 'Mind, if you consent to my killing the Doctor, I'll let you and the young one go free.'

Roz furrowed her brow, considering. 'How do I know you'll keep your word?'

The Abomination frowned. 'Because violating the Rules in that way would prove as heinous as killing the Doctor outright. The repercussions would be...an impediment, to say the least. Therefore, give me leave to devour the Doctor...'

'Or?'

The Abomination chuckled. And suddenly, despite its human-like appearance, it sprouted a huge tongue and raked itself with saliva. 'Oh,

what nonsense you speak. Either you agree to my killing the Doctor...or you'll still be alive as I eat you and the blond one.'

The Vortex: Unreality

The Abhorrence laid out its terms. The Doctor's eyes narrowed. 'It pleases me to concur.'

The Abhorrence rose from the table, ready for a dose of reality. The Doctor followed, pausing to scarf down the last of the buttered scones. The butter wasn't good for his hearts, but what the hell. You only live 13 times.

Now

The Abomination allowed its humanoid 'Coward' form to expand into a more lumpy, amorphic form that sprouted a number of extra limbs and humps ('Humps? What humps?' Roz thought, desperate for comic relief).

The almost humanoid Abomination, still wearing its smoking jacket, mind you, displayed the Memoriter and removed it from its blue casing. Roz squinted, realizing the Memoriter was a small, fleshy pink lump that looked vaguely like a heart. One of the Abomination's newly formed mouths spoke, 'This...artefact... symbiotically linked to the Doctor. Crush it and you crush him.'

'Why?' Roz cried out.

The Abomination reached behind its back and produced another heart, slightly larger than the first and a richer shade of red. 'And this... I created this heart, sympathetically linked to the one called Cwej, when you entered the sanctum.'

Two hearts, one created by the Abomination, one not - but both linked to Roz's friends. And then, to her mounting horror, thee Abomination began to *juggle* the two hearts.

The Abomination, still humanoid but now sprouting about 10 eyes, started slowly, then incorporated grand sweeping motions, tossing the two bits of organic mahogany over its back with roundhouse motions. 'Give me leave to kill the Doctor and you wil live. Decide.'

Roz could have been a statue. The Abomination's hands flared and

materialized short knives, adding them to the mix and threatening to skewer the hearts onto the blades - like a carnival juggler stabbing candied apples. 'Decide, will you.'

Roz waited until the hearts reached a zenith, then pounced and tried to snatch them away. The Abomination anticipated the move and lashed out, battering her ribcage with its tongue and sending her sprawling. The horrific spectacle continued. 'Decide, you must.'

The Abomination calmly juggled the Doctor's life in one hand and Chris' life in the other, forcing its two prizes to jump through the air faster and faster with a talent unknown to this Universe. The monster dared to add torches to the mix, as though the main attraction of some common circus, almost scorching the two lives with a spectral flame.

The Abomination turned to Roz and ordered, 'You will decide between their lives. Now.'

As Roz clenched her bruised ribs, precious time slid away from her. Her own heart demanded, *SAVE CHRIS! For he destroys the darkness within your soul.*

THE DOCTOR! her head countered. *Time's Champion! You can't balance the Doctor with the lives of two Adjudicators!*

Chris! her gut commanded. *The Doctor!* her brain shot back. *Chris! The Doctor! Chris! The Doctor!*

The Abomination juggled faster.

Roz made her choice.

She stepped forward and reached out.

And, in that instant, a Scottish voice boomed across the chamber, screaming 'STOP!' with the intensity of a cannon shell.

Roz turned and saw the Doctor standing in the doorway.

And every known emotion crested over Roz like a tidal wave.

For with the Doctor's entrance, she knew, *she just knew*, that she'd been demoted from being royalty to at best a pawn. The fact that the Doctor just spared her from an intensely personal, moral dilemma was irrelevant. Roz despised that another would choose her destiny.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to shout. She wanted to clench a fist and hit something - and go on hitting it until her armour's blue and gold plating was washed away in another sea of red and she perished

in the crossfire.

And as if the scene couldn't be more garish, the Doctor had Chris' severed leg - his missing piece, as it were - neatly tucked under his arm for safekeeping.

She remembered their earlier conversation about hacked-off limbs and wanted to get angry again, but the Doctor glanced at her, his eyes screaming, *Coincidence.*

Upon seeing its captor, the Abomination let out a scream of horror that nearly shook the sanctum's foundation to powder. '*TIME LORD!*' it blasted out in its frenzy. With a colossal gush, it dissipated its vaguely Coward-like form and its main mass encircled its tentacles around the Doctor. It turned a multitude of colours, even as blood from previous victims pumped through its veins at a quickened pace.

'I could eviscerate you, Time Lord,' raved the Abomination, revelling in the throes of a berserker rage. 'I could congeal your blood into a thick jelly and spread it across the corona of a star, vet leave you conscious enough to suckle every atom of your agony. I could sinuously pull you apart, cell by cell, gene by gene, yet allow you to witness your torment from an eyeball suspended by a thin, blue vein. I could unleash hounds from the bowels of Hell to chase you throughout the 12 dimensions, each of them chewing your brittle frame in a manner that could break even a Gallifreyan.'

And the Doctor, not even measuring up to the creature's mid-section, held up a finger, surprisingly impish, and added, 'Ah, but not, I think, without breaking the Rules.'

The Abomination came to a full stop.

It *quivered with rage*, but dared not even *touch* the Doctor. Its wrath manifested in shades of colours that humans couldn't perceive but which a Time Lord could - meaning the Doctor saw every spectrum shift of the Abomination's wrath with both eyeballs.

And then the Doctor, whom Roz was convinced had testicles of Titanium (Had she really just pondered the Doctor's testicles? The stress was talking), verbally scathed the Abomination with, 'I wish you could see just how pathetic you really are right now.'

The Abomination's 10 eyes underwent mitosis and multiplied, each

of them growing moon-eyed at this accusation. It trembled in the throes of a near paroxysm. It was as if the Doctor had drew out a particularly sharpened scythe, chalked a line on the monster's anatomy and started cutting.

'Power from Beyond the Dawn of Time,' levelled the Doctor, 'yet you've squandered it on hate. Does your extra-dimensional brain allow you to conceive how weak a force hate truly is? Can you have survived from one universe to the next, only to be so limited?'

'If you hate others, you destroy yourself. I told that to an American president during his darkest hour and it's the truth. Hate is a self-loathing yet strikingly beautiful girl with needle marks in her arm. A brother who hasn't spoken to his siblings in 14 years. The sheer butchery of a serial killer. The horror of starving your own people to death.'

The Doctor's voice rose to a fever pitch. 'Are these the things you prize? Is this the despair you would bring? You think they give you power? What do you know of power, Nyarlothtep? A babe in the crib has more power than you.'

The Abomination seethed, desperate to respond with insidious deeds, not words - but utterly forbidden from acting. It could have killed the Doctor again and again, but not without exacting a punishment beyond the comprehension of gods. Even so, its translucent flesh charged with arcane energy and positively ached for action.

The Abomination desperately tried to restrain itself. And then, the Doctor casually raised a hand and calmly added, 'By the way, before we go any further, Cthulhu would also like a word.'

Now

Cthulhu dropped the mnemonics shrouding it from detection. In response, the Abomination - and this is a technical term - metaphysically shat itself.

Roz wouldn't have phrased it that way, but she'd run through enough battlefields to know the smell of fear. And the Abomination was cranking it out by the bucket-full.

The Doctor continued whimsically, 'Cthulhu, I've learned, is very fond

of Fancy Formosa Oolong Dragon tea with two sticks of honey. He's also... mildly perturbed at the way you've been gobbling up your fellow Great Old Ones to steal their power and has exhausted a great deal of effort trying to find you. I mean, he might be the epitome of overwhelming evil, but he's very familial, our Cthulhu. And over scones with chocolate spread, Cthulhu off-handedly suggested it'd like to educate you on... the depth of your folly.'

Cthulhu entered the room behind the Doctor, suffusing the proceedings in a spectral green light. Roz turned her head away, not sure what was happening, but realizing that whatever accompanied the Doctor... it was raw, unadulterated evil. She went down on one knee and clenched Chris' prone form, her cheek on his forehead.

The Doctor rose up to rhetorically whip the Abomination one last time. 'You've spent your millennia of imprisonment doing nothing but despising your fellows, corroding every friendship and line of support. You've consistently hated me, but what has it gained you? Even here, in your sanctum sanctorum, the seat of your power, you daren't lay a tentacle on me. And now you rate less than a grain of cosmic sand.'

The Abomination had the silence of a mortuary. And then, it gasped, 'Then if I die... your companions die... Time Lord.'

Vaster than empires and more fast, the Abomination concentrated its being into a laser-like state and hurled itself straight at Roz and Chris, charging with a speed that butchered at least 37 established laws of physics and made Einstein squirm in his grave. The energy surge was enough to utterly pulverize their human bodies, smearing their atomic bits across the whole of at least five galaxies.

The Abomination never had a chance. With an unbelievable, arcane velocity, Cthulhu intercepted the Abomination before it covered half the distance to the Adjudicators, its green tentacles maniacally ripping the Abomination's defences and wrestling for a death grip. The Abomination knew it didn't have a prayer and opened a portal to the Time Vortex, seeking to flee to the few shadow dimensions allowed by the spells that kept it restrained.

With a flash of searing light, the Abomination and Cthulhu fell out of our reality. In the inrush of air that resulted, the Doctor scrambled for a purchase, allowing the vacuum to claim his question-mark umbrella but

gripping Chris' leg tight to his body as if hugging a piece of one of his best friends.

The Shadow Dimensions

The Abomination transformed into a number of unspeakable shapes throughout the Time Vortex corridors, desperately trying to squirm out of Cthulhu's grip and escape to one of the few haven dimensions within its power. It thrashed, it flexed, it did everything imaginable and unimaginable, but the effort only earned a small respite that made Cthulhu all the more seem like a cat toying with its widdle mousy prey.

Make no mistake: in terms of raw power, the Abomination could handily clobber every member of the Great Old Ones. Every member, that is, except Cthulhu.

'Please! Please! It's the Doctor's fault! Blame the Time Lord! I only wanted to have fun!' the Abomination cried out, showering itself with tears (or the rough equivalent for a Great Old One). Cthulhu's tentacles edged closer. The Abomination committed its resources to a last-ditch attempt to burst free, but Cthulhu effortlessly blocked the effort, furiously driving home its octopus-like assault as the two of them raced faster and faster through unspace. 'Please!... Must I be punished?'

Toward the end, the Abomination considered ending its own existence, but wasn't sure, in those panicked moments, how to go about it. Suicide had never been an issue before now. Death evaded it as Cthulhu flared with the light of Universes long past.

So finally, the Abomination submitted to its fate and just started screaming.

Now

Its pain-riddled roar shockwaved through space, randomly levelling planets and shattering astral bodies that spawned at least eight new asteroid fields. Three civilizations were forever decimated (one of them in the throes of a bloody political campaign, making its populace ironically grateful for the interruption). At least five cosmic dust clouds sparked and flared into newborn stars, lighting the way in the measurable loneliness of space and proving that even in cosmic death,

there was life. The Doctor would have approved.

Now

Roz never confessed to being the smartest of Adjudicators, but she knew when to run like hell. She picked Chris up and hoofed it, Adjudicator armour wheezing with the effort. Behind her, the contest between Cthulhu and the Abomination raged, but she forced herself not to look back at it, fearing a reprisal far, far worse than turning into a giant salt lick.

They were halfway down the corridor when the Abomination unleashed its first bellow of true pain, accompanied by a blast of quantum mnemonics capable of pulping the cerebral cortex of any conscious human that heard it. But Chris was out cold. And Roz... Roz sensed rather than saw the Doctor's hands pinwheel toward her, his gossamer touch brushing her temples and popping out her consciousness like the pulling of a plug from a sink.

Her legs grew leaden and her body weight crashed down in slow motion. She heard a voice that *could not* possibly be hers, pleading for help from the Doctor, then Chris, then even her sister Leabie and perhaps, just perhaps, her lost brother. And then, as the Abomination's cries reached their crescendo, the darkness wrapped around her like a warm blanket and she hurled herself into it.

Now

Roz woke in the TARDIS infirmary, a Xhosa battle cruiser in front of her. No, wait. It was the most harmless Xhosa cruiser ever made, constructed of paper and resting on her nightstand tray. She glanced over at Chris, happily gluing models together in the bed next to her. He saw she was awake and considered a myriad of comments, but simply settled on 'Hey.'

She exhaled deeply. 'How's your leg?'

'Oh, completely healed,' Chris shrugged. 'The Doctor patched it together hours ago. Externally, you can't even tell the difference, except that I'm missing some hair. Wanna see?' Roz hurriedly waved a hand to decline. Chris added, 'The Doctor... err, he said I should talk to

him or you if there were any *internal* scars, but err... I'd rather just build more models if that's okay.'

'Sure,' she nodded. Chris reminded her of a classmate's sister, who'd endured open-heart surgery when she was four and thought it the most fun thing in the world. Naturally, her parents nearly died from fright, but children just don't rationalize pain like adults.

She considered asking how the Doctor, who in all fairness was not the tallest of beings, could have single-handedly hauled herself, Chris, Chris' severed leg and undoubtedly the Memoriter too, out of the mayhem, but considered it the least of her concerns.

Chris held up a diagram drawn on one of Benny's Post-It Notes. 'The Doctor says I can walk in an hour, and asked me to stash the Memoriter in one of the TARDIS' cache rooms.'

Roz snatched the note away. 'I'll do it.'

'Are you sure? It's really no trouble...'

'*I'll do it,*' she jabbed, then cautiously stood up. 'Chris... I thought it might be a good idea, now that the Doctor's repaired the Pool Room, if you and I were to go whitewater rafting sometime.'

Chris did a double take. It was probably the gentlest offer Roz had ever given him. He thought about how to respond, but she'd already left the room.

The Future

He was dying, Merlin... the Doctor... was dying. But the moment had been prepared for - even if it involved a lot of temporal bailing wire.

True, he'd encountered a civilization where a group of telepaths had funnelled their negative impulses into a filter, the Memoriter, thus turning their society into a utopia. But that filter was a small child, alone, unloved, unwanted and unmourned, sealed in a stone room beneath the city's main gathering hall.

And the Doctor... err... Merlin, knowing the society was doomed in 13 years' time, offered to substitute one of his own hearts for the child. If he couldn't save a society, he could at least redeem one person.

And true, hearts aren't telepathic components organs as such, but the hearts of Time Lords, detached as they are from space-time, oddly made for acceptable substitutes. The townsfolk agreed, allowing the Marquis, who'd accompanied the Time Lord to cut out one of Merlin's hearts and make it the new Memoriter - 'Memoriter' is, of course, a euphemism for 'the heart'.

A frightful journey back to the TARDIS followed, with the Marquis placing the child in a room prepared for it and running, on the Doctor's instructions, to find a refrigerator of Limburger cheese. A refrigerator that held the Memoriter, stolen by agents of Nyarlothtep but recovered by the Doctor's former self until it was waiting for him now. Time had purified the Doctor's heart of the negative impulses and it beat with a fleshy pink of health.

Merlin had passed out in the console room as the Marquis returned and began emergency surgery, while in the TARDIS nursery, the child fitfully turned over and fell into a rich sleep. Whatever became of it isn't certain, as Merlin likes to keep his wwn council.

Now

Roz placed the Memoriter in a refrigerator full of Limburger cheese, where it'd presumably remain until the Doctor had need of it.

She found him in the cleared-out Domino Room, which now stood as 1,500 square yards of virgin space, awaiting reconstruction brick by brick. The little Doctor was seated on one of the upper tiers, thoughtfully setting down a new row of red Sherbet-collared Dominoes.

He glanced up and smiled as she approached. 'Ah, Roz. I'm so glad to see you up and about. I know you'd rather have bamboo shoved under your fingernails than drink tea. Could I percolate you some black coffee instead?'

Her look could have punched holes through concrete. And the Doctor - the being who'd shared tea with Cthulhu and stared down absolute horror from beyond the Dawn of Time with little difficulty - actually felt a sliver of trepidation travel up his spines. He caught his breath and softly asked, 'Roz, is there something you'd like to know?'

'Yes,' Roz shot at him, her tone razoring through his torso. 'What

happened to Nyarlathotep?'

'Ah,' said the Doctor with some regret. 'Imprisoned forever, I should think, restrained by layer upon layer of Earth-based magicks that I doubt even Cthulhu knows how to undo. I suspect that at some point in his 'youth,' Nyarlathotep was buried alive, rattling him to the core and making him claustrophobic. He's trapped forever now, and... suffering continuously.'

'Good,' Roz shot back. If the Doctor winced, he gave no outward sign. 'And Cthulhu?'

'It sleeps once again, immobile but aware of events, awaiting the day it can rally its kind to wreck havoc and greedily drink the souls of innocents. But I've already begun operations to counter that'

Roz nodded, then continued with passion, 'If you could have defeated Nyarlathotep by simply siccing Cthulhu on his Great Old ass, why the living hell didn't you do it before now?'

The Doctor sighed, looking very tired and clenching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. 'Because by summoning Cthulhu, I... accelerated the magicks that keep the overwhelming majority of the Great Old Ones imprisoned. The arcane physics here are a bit hard to calculate, but the incantations that bind them will likely lose their potency a couple of centuries earlier than first expected.'

Even Roz, furious as she was, stopped breathing for a second.

He looked her in the eye. 'In that respect, I altered causality. Understand if you can, Roz, that I've tangled with only a few of the Great Old Ones who freed themselves - Hastur the Unspeakable, Azathoth - but the majority are still in stasis, hotly malevolent for their imprisonment. When freed, the Great Old Ones will try to suck our Universe dry *en masse* like a hummingbird gulping down nectar, even as higher powers in our reality marshal themselves for all-out warfare. Fortunately.., if you can call it that... more passive plans are in the works to prevent that. Yet those plans require a co-ordination of effort and precise timing...'

Roz cut hint off, appalled, 'And you've ruined that timing by giving the Great Old Ones a get-out-of-jail early card.'

The Doctor tapped his chin against his umbrella handle. 'Not ruined,

exactly. It simply means we must clear the board and start again.'

'Goddess. You risked everything to save Chris and I,' she deadpanned. 'Don't lie to me, Doctor, or I'll know. Did you sacrifice my brother?'

The Doctor's eyes turned grey. 'Yes,' he whispered.

'You wiped him from existence, but not me and Chris. *Why?*'

He looked her in the eye. 'It was what your brother wanted. Also, at the time, I didn't have any other options. Whereas with you and Chris, the plan for kyboshing the Great Old ones *could* be altered...'

'But you aren't certain.'

'...No.'

'You should have let us die,' Roz spat, silencing him. 'I was ready for us to die. I was up on that pedestal, you know. Your life was in one hand, Chris' and mine in the other. And I chose...'

The Doctor held up a hand, 'You don't have to tell me...'

'It was you,' Roz shouted, losing control and hating herself for it. 'I would have sacrificed myself so that *you* could live. Goddess, I would have let *Chris*, whom...' she sharply cut herself off, '...I would have let both of us die just so you could live to complete your work and safeguard the innocent. And I blame you for that, Doctor. You know why? Because you gave me something to believe in. Stab your eyes.'

The Doctor stared at her blankly. 'Do you really hate me, Roz?'

Roz immediately blasted him with, 'Yes.'

The little Time Lord nodded. It was the answer he'd been expecting.

'I hate you,' Roz continued in her fury, 'because *you 're always right, Doctor.*'

The Doctor looked up, his eyes slowly ebbing from grey to a blue. And an understanding was borne between them.

Roz visibly unclenched and looked away from the Doctor, glancing about the empty room as a speck of dirt landed in her eye - perhaps the TARDIS air filtration system was malfunctioning. 'I'll let you make that cup of coffee now, Doctor,' she slowly said. Then, in a whisper that was almost, *almost* akin to pleading, she added, 'And then perhaps then you could tell me about my brother.'

The Doctor's face bore the merest hint of a smile. He rose to make

the coffee, but first set another domino back into place.

Order had to be maintained, after all.

The Ashes of Eden

Lorelei S. Jordan

I think they know I'm here.

I can almost hear the screams. Among the silent pathways and streams of light and energy my ship is afloat, drifting on the mists, cascading in the eternal twilight. They call to me from down there, in the soft blue and green and white swirls of the world they call home. I remember their cries of anguish, their calls for blood, the penchant for death. I sometimes wake in the middle of the night, screaming, waiting in fear for them, looking around me for a glimpse of their hideous alien faces, their piercing green eyes in the dark.

I remember those nights, in the darkness, stranded, all alone. My life that wasn't really life as much as a series of interconnected electronic impulses. Did I live those days? Or am I hallucinating? The memories are clear to me, of course, but how can I be sure they are my memories, or the thoughts and dreams of a dead man whose spirit was granted me in these last few hours over this alien world?

I dreamt those many nights, caught between the threat of reality and the nightmares of imagination. I dreamt of her, my beautiful bride, her blushing cheeks, her soft lips, her warm skin. She was as real to me as any other, but I could not touch her. I could see her occasionally, peering out from within my vast window, always close yet always apart. I saw her with the man who took her from me - the hateful being whose greed and drive kept me away from her. Kept me trapped within my prison. My hatred for him swells, the anguish within me rising like a caged animal.

He knew I was here, I tell myself repeatedly. I was never only a loss, never merely the brother remembered for bravely yet cast to the ashes on a voyage into darkness. I was a prisoner of war: a casualty. And were it not for my luck, I would be dead... no, I would be worse than dead - nothing more than an electronic impulse. Nothingness.

Did I exist? Or was I only a dream? A dream within my very own

mind... an infinite loop of thought and soul and hate and fear and love?

I look beyond the window, out at the planet. The planet I know, and yet do not know. I was there for a week, and I was there for a year. It is a matter of perspective. Of mine. But no longer.

The voices cry out to me. They know me. They call me by name. The planet is familiar to me. It knows me. I shall not fail my duty.

I shall not fail my duty.

The engines are silent. I can hear myself breathing, soft, laboured. I can feel the warmth of my love resting heavy on my heart. She will understand, I tell myself. She will believe in my vision. She will know my pain. Yet I will protect her, like I will protect them all.

I can hear a curious noise behind me. It grows in strength, almost as if it were the engine of a train. Then it calms itself. Then the silence returns.

'Hello,' says a voice from behind me. I turn around.

There are two with me. I never thought I would see them again: the toothy, grinning fellow with the red coat and the scarf, and the beautiful red-haired woman in a blue striped jumble. It seems like only yesterday that I had met them, though it's been a while. I will not let them stop me.

'Hello, Doctor,' I say to the man. And to the woman: 'Romana.'

'Nice to see you,' says Romana, but I can tell she is lying. Her face is full of ire, her brow heavy with concern.

'Fascinating to run into you again... here,' says the Doctor. 'Couldn't be a coincidence, could it?'

I shake my head. 'If you're here, you already know why I've come.'

'Yes, I do,' says the Doctor. He looks beyond, through the window, at the soft blues and greens of the world below. 'Charming little planet, really, give or take the natives. I thought we'd paid our only social call - isn't that right, Romana?'

'Nice place to visit,' she says, 'but I wouldn't want to live there.'

'Pity to have to return, for some unfinished business.' The Doctor stops, a momentary countenance of memory. 'Then again, you have lived there, haven't you, in a manner of speaking?'

He is trying to confuse me. 'You shouldn't be here, Doctor. You know why I have to do this.'

'Nonsense,' says the Doctor. 'The universe has protected its secret for millions of years, and it will continue to do so.' He pauses, perhaps only for the dramatic effect it will have on me. I cannot be sure. 'You know, martyrdom won't save the universe from its own devisings. Never has. Like trying to redirect the rushing river... it always re-corrects its course.'

'It is a danger, Doctor,' I say. 'This world. It is a scourge on the galaxy. But then, you know that, don't you? I'll stop that. I know this planet's power.'

'And would you deny them a right to live?' asks Romana, stepping forward. 'It isn't fair, you know. The Mandrels don't know what they really are. They're just another race of brutes. Perhaps they'll evolve, over time, maybe in a few million years - they could be great beings of power, you know, cure disease, bring peace to the universe. Have you ever thought of that?'

'No,' I say, though I am lying and they know it. 'I can't let anyone discover the secret. The temptation would be too great... the consequences too deadly.'

The Doctor looks back at me. He can see the beads of sweat forming on my brow. I cannot give in, not here, not now. I've come too far. 'Perhaps a quarantine, then,' he says, 'a warning buoy or-'

'And what then?' I reply. Catch hint within his game of logic. 'To lie in wait for a corrupt official, or a bureau clerk with a gambling debt looking for an opportunity to make a profit? And then what, Doctor? Is the death of this world too high a price to pay to stop the suffering of an entire universe?' I pointed at the window. 'Look, Doctor. Romana. Look outside, at that primeval world. Its spinning clouds and fog, which hide its deadly secret. The secret I'm going to destroy.' I face the window. 'Tri-cobalt missiles. They fuse with the atmosphere, igniting it. One minute, then Armageddon.'

Romana sighs. I can see she is looking for the right words, and finding none.

'Eden must die,' I say. 'Face it, you know I'm right. The continued existence of the Mandrels, or the death of a galaxy. Vraxoin is real, Doctor. You've seen what it can do, what it did to those people on that ship. What it did to Tryst, even! His greed, his... Doctor, he still thinks

he was right. The prison warden, he told me that Tryst believed he was doing the right thing. That the Valanti expedition was the only way to save those creatures. Look what Vraxoin did to him!'

'He was misguided,' says Romana. 'He can learn the error of his ways.'

'Now you're being naive.' I respond. 'Tryst knew what he was doing, and so did I, when I came back to this horrible place. They tried to stop me, of course, but they couldn't.' I tap the control console in front of me. 'Good ship. They didn't even miss it until I was gone.'

'But they miss you now,' says the Doctor. 'So does Della.'

'That's how we found you, Stott,' Romana adds. 'She left word for us. Della misses you terribly. She didn't understand why you left. She doesn't want to lose you.'

Della. My love. 'She lost me ages ago.'

'And found you, Stott,' the Doctor notes. 'Torn apart, reunited - why ruin a happy ending with such a devastating postscript?'

I look back out, at the planet before me. 'Eden calls to me, Doctor.' I pause. 'My Della. I am dead to her now. I've been dead for a year. Someday she'll understand. I can't go back.'

'We can help,' Romana says. 'We can make them all understand.'

'They never will,' I reply. 'And soon, they'll want Eden for their own. They'll find the secret, they'll kill the Mandrels for their own purposes - and for what? A universe of drug addicts? Of lost children, parents dead by their own hands? That's the cold legacy of the Valanti expedition: entire civilizations destroyed for a moment of artificial bliss. No, I will not let it happen.'

The console winks at me. The blue button is waiting for its opportunity.

The Doctor turns back toward me, and now I can see the concern in his eyes. 'Everyone has freedom of choice, Stott. Even you, right now. You chose to join Federation Intelligence. You chose to love Della. Those creatures down there have the freedom to choose as well. You cannot interfere with the normal evolution of intelligent creatures. You would be a murderer.'

'Then brand me a killer,' I say, 'because I've made my choice.'

I press the button.

'No!' cries the Doctor, running toward me. The emotions that run over Romana's face transpose from incredulity to disgust, all in the brief flash of seconds. The Doctor checks the console, but it is too late. I can hear the roar of the rockets on either side of the ship, can see the hot flash of fuel as they tear away from the craft, barrelling down on the surface below. The Doctor grabs my shoulder, turns me toward the planet, the three of us watching helplessly as the rockets descend toward their destination.

The planet Eden.

The Mandrels.

Vraxoin.

A planet of death.

'Do you know what you've done?! asks the Doctor. His voice was full of rage - a man so unused to the fury that consumes him. I can see that it startles Romana; she backs away from me. 'You've condemned an entire race to ruin! It didn't have to end this way!'

I can barely manage more than a whisper. 'It did for me, Doctor.'

I see the flashes. I look in Romana's eyes and see the flicker of light, as the rockets reach their target.

The soft blues and greens, the soaring clouds... all billow away in the fire of death.

And I can hear the screams.

They reverberate through my mind, as I feel my bounty die. *Stott*... they cry, the beings of darkness, the green glowing eyes. The Mandrels and I were linked by destiny when I came to their world, and in the death of their world I find my fate.

Within moments, the flair of the tricobalt bombs wither and die, and I gaze once again on Eden for a final glimpse. Brown, swirling blackness, inhospitable, unliveable, dead. The Mandrels are gone, their carcasses consumed by fire until not a trace remains. Eden is silent.

The Doctor steps backwards, away from the window. 'You killed them all,' he says.

'Yes.' I stand blithely, turning toward him. 'Yes I did. And I would do it again. In some cases, Doctor, the end does justify the means. Now,

the world will be free of vraxoin. And I did it. I destroyed it.'

To my surprise, Romana places her hand upon my shoulder. 'Yes, Stott, you killed them all. And now you can live with that fact for the rest of your life. That you threw away the future of an entire species because you couldn't think of a better way. Or you simply didn't *want* to. What a waste.'

A waste. I can tell she isn't talking about the Mandrels.

She is talking about me.

Then she leaves me, she steps forward, touches the Doctor, who has remained staid and sombre. I can see the flash of reality before him; the scourge of death, touching his soul. He looks at me... no, through me, with piercing eyes that echo through mine, all the way to my heart. 'Come on, Doctor, let's go.'

I can see his anger, but the vastness between us is too far. I cannot speak to him, cannot make him understand. *I am sorry*. Silently, he turns away, Romana taking his arm as she leads him into the antechamber beyond the door, into that blue box I'd seen back aboard the *Empress*.

And I can hear him whisper.

'It didn't have to end this way,' he says dejectedly as they closed the door.

I hear the sound again, and the blue box vanishes from my eyes.

I am alone. Slowly, I turn back toward the window. The ashes of Eden await me. A dead world, a million souls. My bounty.

I was right. Wasn't I?

I killed them all. I did it all for them. For you, Della, I did it for you. For the children you will one day have. In time, you will understand. Not today, perhaps, not tomorrow, but one day. You will know I did the right thing for the right reasons. I saved you, Della. I saved all of them.

Yes, Stott, you murdered them all.

No. I saved the universe. They won't have to fear the darkness of Vraxoin. No more lost children, no more screams in the night. No more drug of death. I protected them all, like I protect them with my weapon. My gun. The weapon that saved me from the scourge of the Mandrels, all those many months in the Eden projection.

A million dead to save a million yet unborn.

I love you, Della. I cannot come home. Not even with the gun to protect me. The weapon like that I gave to Eden. The Mandrels call to me, from beyond their black grave.

Good night, Stott. And she is gone.

I am alone. Emptiness. Only myself, a stolen ship, and a dead planet.

My guilt.

I cry now. Tears of anger, of rage. I've never killed anyone in cold blood, and now I have taken life on a scale unimaginable.

I am become death, destroyer of worlds.

I am darkness, like the dark creatures of Eden. They still call to me now, only I can hear them while I am awake. They want me to follow them. The Mandrels hear my crying, beckon me to follow them into the emptiness. My guilt is unbearable; I cannot continue; I lift the gun. Into its barrels I peer, darkness like the darkness of my soul, of the world below. Of the murder, the hate, the fury, all for the lost souls, the unborn children, the fragile wastes of despair, the field of death and destruction that lay barren below me.

I must follow them, on the path we walk together. Myself and the Mandrels. My brothers in death.

I have returned home. The home I never left.

Eden is watching me.

I pull the -

The Dark Domain

Nathan A. Skreslet

light open empty life surging through the void rivers of life streaming dark no boundaries heaving gathering into tributaries to flow into the crashing black and the rolling swell coursing up blue valleys to break into the light life and burst the banks swelling to meet more of the joyous life blissful relaxing cool flowing life perfect harmonious confluence...

fear
danger
HEAVY pulling HEAVY grasping hauling seizing clenching HEAVY
HEAVY
Loss
Falling

Voyage Data Recorder transcript Vessel: Ugoma Mission: Survey of Rim Systems Recorder ejected 78382/8/477 28:00 Hours

[Beginning of section relevant to recovery mission]

C: Is there any life? L: There are some small settlements on the southern continent of the fourth planet, Captain. Negligible current technological development, but there is evidence of a regression from grade 10 status. C: [A grunt] No need to worry about the natives now, then. How many of the planets are habitable? L: The first three are desolate but the other three are capable of supporting life. Only the fourth seems to be currently inhabited. There are widespread ruins on the fifth and sixth planets, but most of the natural resources appear to be intact. C: [Rubbing hands together] Sounds like a promising star system. Anything else of note? L: The orbits of all six planets are even more erratic than the last system we surveyed, sir. C: Could that be due to proximity to the galactic rim? [Pause] L: I don't think so, sir. The mass imbalances are very pronounced. All of my calculations point to

the gravitic distortions of many more masses - possibly planetary bodies - but sensors detect only one star and six planets with a few small, dead moons. Nothing that could cause this kind of shift. C: [Another grunt] Keep scanning, Lieutenant. L: Yes, sir. [Long pause] M: Captain, I've got something. C: [A grunt of interest] Let's hear it, Major. M: It's a very faint signal of radio pulses in some kind of code. [Heavily distorted transmission plays over bridge speakers] C: I didn't get much out of that, Major. M: I'll see if I can translate it. [Pause] I think it says, 'Keep away. Avoid the... shadow rocks. Do not approach for your own safety.' C: What's that supposed to mean? M: I don't know, sir. L: It's coming from a decaying satellite in orbit around the fourth planet, sir. C: Take us into orbit around that planet, Lieutenant. [Pause] L: Is that a good idea, sir? C: [Angry] What? L: Well, the warning, sir. Are you going to disregard it? C: That satellite has been there for decades. Whatever it was warning about may not even be here any longer. What's more, if there is a navigational hazard in this area, it's our job to investigate it. This system could be a valuable acquisition for the Morok Empire. L: [Sheepishly] Yes, sir. Engaging engines. Entering star system.

[Recording ends. VDR ejected minutes after last order.]

Mission Briefing is as follows:

Tactical survey ship Ugoma was lost to mysterious force or forces unknown within the Tae Nega system. The Sixth Battle Fleet is to proceed with speed to Tae Nega and: 1) Determine the cause of the scout ship's destruction. 2) Recover any surviving crew. 3) Identify and neutralize any hostile forces. 4) Secure the habitable planets for the extension of Morok Imperial Jurisdiction.

There is very little that can be done when your planet is under attack from unseen opponents. It becomes a fact of life that must simply be tolerated, when the only other option is to become a nervous paranoid wreck living forever in fear of invisible death raining from the sky. Icrin surveyed the shattered hulks that had once been buildings in this scrap heap that could barely pass for a city. He mused on his prospects. No

possessions to lose, at least. No family, thank the Gods. Icrin had never been one to be tied down; it made life easier. He watched the tiny figures sifting through the rubble. Their plaintive wails were carried on the hot wind. He turned away.

What was he doing here? His current existence demanded that he scavenge for food and shelter in the decaying remains of crumbling buildings. He could never return to the Subcity where it was safe. He was a deserter. He could hardly believe how far he had fallen. There was no end in sight for him or the tooth-and-nail subsistence to which he had consigned himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sound he initially thought was just the wind rushing through the rough, naked support columns of the old building. But it was lower and growling like the sound of an injured but enraged animal. He cast around for the source of the strange noise, which was growing louder by the minute. Then he saw a flashing light in the debris-strewn courtyard below. He stood amazed as a tall blue structure faded into view from the air itself. With a final 'thunk' it attained solidity and sat innocuously in a corner as though begging not to be thought out of place.

Scrambling down the scree-slope of concrete, plastic and various shredded metals, using projecting rebars to break his headlong slide, Icrin raced to get to the object. His mind was whirling and he barely noticed having picked something up from the ground.

The Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS doors and shut them behind him. His voluminous black opera cloak, lined with red satin, swirled in the hot breeze as he swept his surroundings with keen eyes and the wind ruffled through his snow-white hair. As far as he could see he was surrounded by cracked and broken buildings and mounds of debris. In this apparently desolate landscape he was very surprised to see a humanoid creature big and sliding headlong towards him.

He was even more surprised when the creature hit him with a large chunk of concrete.

'Tell me again,' Bacra said, 'Slowly this time.' Icrin took a deep breath and tried to smooth his heat-exchanging fins with a nervous hand. They

were purple with agitation and trepidation at being in the presence of Bacra, the Leader of the Vieth Council.

'The alien came out of a tall blue structure that appeared out of the air, Leader.'

'I see.' Bacra rubbed his jaw meditatively. Then he looked up sharply. 'Tell me why I should accept the word of a deserter.'

Icrin swallowed. 'I have suffered a moment of weakness, Leader. I wish to show my undying devotion to the defence of the Vieth people by capturing this alien. He may be an agent of the people we fight, they might finally be revealed to us!'

Bacra nodded and turned to his Chief Scientist, Nocath, who was stooped over the prone body of the alien. 'What do your studies reveal?'

Nocath, whose head fins were soft and drooping with age, stood up. His long face was emotionless as usual. 'He is clearly not of our race and his biology is certainly alien; I detect a double heartbeat.'

'Does he have the capacity for invisibility?'

'There is no way to know without a more detailed anatomical analysis. But judging by this soldier's story it would appear that is it this man's capsule that is able to mask itself.'

All three jumped back as the stranger suddenly sat up and fixed them with a piercing stare from his clear and startlingly blue eyes.

'You know, if you chaps had simply told me you were having a spot of bother I would have readily offered my help. There was no need to hit me with a rock.'

'What is the status of the fleet?'

'We are entering the Tae Nega system, last reported position of the Ugoma, Admiral.'

'All stop.'

'All stop, sir.'

Admiral Lotoc resumed his seat in his plush command chair and surveyed the white expanse of his bridge. It was as spotless and immaculate as the long sleeved one-pieces and tabards worn by all of the Morok crew.

'I want a thorough scan of the system. Give me data specifically on

the mass anomaly reported in the Ugoma logs as well as any remains of the ship or salvageable escape pods.'

'Yes, sir. I am detecting the same mass imbalance that the Ugoma reported. There is some debris from the ship floating in the midst of it. I can't find any escape pod transponder signals.'

Lotoc's face became grim. 'No survivors, then.'

'No, sir. Further analysis based on information from the other ships indicates a field of... invisible matter throughout this system. It seems to fill the spaces between the planets.'

'Is there any way to get past it?'

'Not for a ship this size, sir, but a small transport craft might be able to make it through. The field is constantly shifting so it will need to be in constant contact with us.'

'See to it, Major. I want a landing party on that fourth planet as soon as possible.'

'So you think that I'm one of the unseen enemy you've been fighting?'

Bacra eyed the stranger suspiciously. 'What else would you have us assume, alien? You are not of our race and you appeared from the air.'

'You can stop calling me “alien”. I'm known as the Doctor, and furthermore I know nothing about your current predicament.'

Nocath asserted, 'But you do not deny that you came out of the air.'

'Of course not, that's how my TAR ...that is to say, my capsule travels. However I've only just arrived on your planet.'

Nocath looked interested. 'Perhaps that is how he was able to escape the shadow rocks.'

The Doctor was confused. 'Shadow rocks?'

'Our planet is now surrounded by an invisible asteroid sphere which prevents us from leaving orbit,' Nocath explained. 'Our settlements on the fifth and sixth planets were cut off from us. Without supply lines they quickly perished. Only one of our satellites remains in low orbit as a warning beacon to other races, which are still capable of space travel. We are trapped here while our invisible enemies smite us from above with impunity.' His words were tinged with bitterness.

The Doctor's face was a mixture of concern and extreme interest. 'When did all of this happen?'

'One hundred and fifty-nine years ago.'

'And you have assumed all of this time that you are at war... could this not simply be a natural phenomenon? Why are you so sure that there is another force operating here?'

Bacra stepped forward. 'There must be! They've been attacking us for more than a century.'

'So because you can't see them you know they're there. I've heard similar arguments to support the existence of everything from UFOs to government conspiracies. It just doesn't hold water, old chap.'

'I've seen them.'

All eyes turned to Icrin. 'I've seen them,' he repeated.

'Go on,' The Doctor encouraged him. He could see that the man was distraught. Icrin's eyes were glazed over as though he was looking inwards, as though he was reliving some very painful event. 'It was a few months ago,' he began slowly. 'I was with my unit observing some of the craters left by the last bombardment. We ran across a shape, an indentation in the ground. It was shifting like water flowing over the dust, but it was dry, totally dry. There was a screaming in our heads. Some of the men went mad immediately; one or two tried firing at the rippling thing but the bullets just hung in mid air. We might have hit it, I don't know. But the screaming got worse, much worse. That's when it ripped my men apart. I ran. I dropped my weapon and ran. I told them back at base that there had been a building collapse and I was the only survivor. Rather than be sent out again, I deserted. I've been hiding out in the highest parts of the remaining buildings for months. I won't go near any of the craters again.'

When he had finished he hung his head and there was silence in the room. The Doctor broke it. 'I see. I would rather like to investigate this place where you saw ...er, encountered this creature or force.'

Icrin had reluctantly agreed to come along as a guide so long as a contingent of guards accompanied the group. Bacra, Nocath and the Doctor made up the rest of the company. Bacra had almost vetoed the trip, but something made him feel that he could trust this strange man.

Night had fallen, but the sky was ablaze with colour. Streaks of livid yellow, ruby red and brilliant orange laced the atmosphere.

'Extraordinary,' the Doctor remarked. 'Has it always been like this?'

Bacra grimaced, 'Only since the war started. We hardly ever come up here anymore; the Subcity is so much safer. Only the scavengers and the outcasts live on the surface.'

The Doctor managed to bite back a few choice remarks about social equality. 'This sort of meteorite activity is unusual for a planet this size... not enough gravitational pull, you see. It's almost as though you were passing though an aster... of course, you mentioned those shadow rocks of yours. Perhaps smaller particulates succumbing to the planet's gravity could account for it.'

Nocath was not amused by the Doctors ruminations. 'I'm glad you find our sky-lights entertaining, alien. To us they are merely the bars on our cage.'

Icrin interrupted them. 'This way.'

They followed him under a semi-collapsed archway and into a bowl-shaped depression, which had been carved out of a cluster of decomposing buildings. It resembled nothing more than a bomb crater. Several soldiers rushed forward to check out the area but the Doctor immediately dropped to his knees and began sifting through the debris at his feet. With a cry of surprise and delight he jumped up holding... nothing. He turned to Nocath and said, 'Here, catch,' and seemed to mime throwing something.

Instinctively, Nocath put his hands up and was astonished to feel himself catch something. But his hands were empty. His hands told him that he was holding a roughly fist-sized mass with a rough surface that felt very much like stone of some kind except that his forgers couldn't seem to get any traction on its surface. 'What is this?'

The Doctor looked extraordinarily pleased with himself. 'Well, unless I'm very much mistaken, that is a fragment of one of your shadow rocks. It's composed of dark matter, at least it seems to be.'

Bacra cocked his finned head inquisitively, 'Dark matter?'

'Well, it's very much the stuff of astrophysics theorems and quantum equations. It was long thought to be the cosmic glue that held the galaxy together. It makes up almost ninety percent of the known universe and contributes its mass to balance the rotations of planets, star systems, galaxies, but since it is undetectable except by its

gravitational effect it is largely ignored. It has no smell, no taste and it's invisible. I also should not be able to touch it.'

Bacra nodded, 'We know this substance of which you speak, Doctor. Our scientists once told us of a universe that existed concurrent to ours that we could not see. It was incorporated into some of our religious beliefs as a spiritual realm we call the dark domain.'

Nodding thoughtfully, the Doctor looked around at the large depression in which they were standing. 'This is certainly the impact crater of a small asteroid composed of dark matter. That,' he indicated the invisible lump in Nocath's hands, 'is one of the surviving fragments. I don't see any premeditation in these strikes; you just have millions of tons of invisible rock circling your planet. Some of it was bound to be caught by your gravity and make planetfall. But there are three things that simply don't fit: the testimony of Mister Icrin here, the sudden onset of all of these occurrences, and the fact that are we able to touch it.'

Icrin had been hovering in a corner all this time. The Doctor could hardly blame him, the man was nervous and extremely jumpy now that he was forced to confront the place associated with his most feared memory. Icrin startled everyone by jumping up abruptly. 'What is that noise?' His voice was a panicked whisper.

Quiet at first, but getting louder, a droning noise filled the air.

'Come on!' The Doctor shouted as he bounded out of the ruins.

Out in the courtyard, a craft was coming in to land. Its bone-white hull had numerous scratches and blemishes on it as though it had been hit by a severe meteorite storm. The large weapons pods bulging from its long curved flanks gave no illusions as to its function.

All of the Vieth stared at it, their mouths gaping with astonishment. 'This is impossible.' Nocath spluttered in a rare display of emotion. 'No ship has come or gone from our world for over one hundred and fifty years.'

'Well, mine did,' interjected the Doctor. 'However, I think you should be rather less than pleased to see these people.'

'Why?'

'It's a Morok landing party.'

The ship had settled with a final retro-burst and a cloud of thick grey dust. Wide doors opened in the back of the craft and a huge slab slid out to make a broad ramp. Lines of men in white uniforms began to form an honour guard along it. They wore respirators with mirrored visors, which were connected by a pipe under each arm to a large supply pack. They also carried very large, threatening energy weapons. Down the centre of the incline strode another figure in white without any protective gear. His tabard had three lines of red across each shoulder, signifying some high rank. He was flanked by two more soldiers, each of whom carried a tall standard bearing the Morok battle flag.

The soldiers stuck their standards into the ground at the foot of the ramp and then stepped back into position behind the officer. All of the soldiers crashed to attention and saluted the flags by slapping their right fist on their chests. The officer spoke. 'On behalf of Admiral Lotoc and the Morok Empire, I, Commander Lec, claim the star system Tae Nega and all of its habitable planets and satellites for incorporation under Morok Imperial Jurisdiction. Any sentient life forms are expected to declare allegiance to the Empire within two days of receiving this ultimatum or we will be forced to destroy you all.'

With that he turned and strode back up the ramp into his spacecraft, leaving stunned silence behind him.

Back at the Council Chambers in the Subcity, most of the group sat despondently while the Doctor paced and Nocath stood by the door glowering at him. The Moroks had withdrawn into their transport craft to await the response to their pronouncement. The Doctor was the first to break the silence. 'This changes everything. The Moroks will not hesitate to carry out their threat; I've seen them conquer other worlds, and they are merciless.'

Nocath responded, 'You can tell your friends that we will not surrender.'

The Doctor was taken aback. 'My friends? I can assure you, sir, they will kill me just as soon as any of you.'

Nocath persisted, 'But they are like you.'

'Apart from their thick waists and receding hairlines I suppose you're right that we appear the same, but they will make no distinctions among any of us when it comes to xenophobic slaughter. The real priority now is to make contact with the beings that are attacking you.'

Bacra interjected, 'We are being invaded and you are willing to go hunting creatures that only Icrin here has ever seen?'

'Yes, because the Moroks will want to eliminate them as well. If they do exist then perhaps we can get them to see that the enemy of my enemy...'

'...could still be my enemy, Doctor. We have no way of knowing if they can reason as we do.'

'But we must try,' the Doctor insisted. 'Otherwise you could be caught fighting a two-front war against these creatures and the Moroks. After decades of fighting the former you're in no condition to take on the latter.'

'I see the truth in what you say, Doctor,' Bacra assented. 'You may have what resources you need to make contact with the inhabitants of the dark domain.'

The Doctor gave him a short bow. 'I thank you, Leader Bacra. I shall endeavour to be worthy of your trust.'

The communications link was slightly crackly as Commander Lec stood before it. When the distorted image of Admiral Lotoc flashed upon the screen, Lec slapped his chest with his right fist in the traditional Morok salute. Lotoc reciprocated and enquired, 'What news, Commander?'

'Our terms have been given, sir. We await a response.'

'I want you to seek out the local authorities, Commander. Find out if they were the ones who destroyed our scout ship. It might have been this shifting field, but it would be unfortunate to kill them before finding out the full truth of the situation.'

'What is that thing, Doctor?' Icrin enquired, gazing at the strange apparatus the Doctor was constructing.

'Well, essentially it's a form of psychic amplifier. I'm going to use it to boost my brain waves.'

'How will that help?'

'I believe that what you and your men experienced was an attempt at psychic communication from a being which operates on totally different mental principles to you. It hurt you, you shot at it, and it retaliated. Now, I have a greater resistance to such things, so I'm going to try to make contact.'

Icrin thought for a moment. 'Isn't that horribly dangerous?' The Doctor merely gave him a brief glare and returned to his tinkering.

After a long series of 'hmmms' and 'ahhhhs' during which Icrin could do nothing but twiddle his thumbs, the Doctor finally leapt to his feet brandishing something that looked like a cross between a helmet and a pincushion.

'Is it done?' Icrin asked.

'Yes, I think so,' the Doctor answered. 'Let's go try it out, shall we?'

Bacra was very surprised when the Morok emissary was announced. The man stood there in his spotless uniform, sweeping the Council Chambers with a cool, superior eye. He refused the chair that Bacra offered him and began without preamble. 'Our scout ship was destroyed in this area. We demand to know why.'

Bacra shook his head, causing his fins to flap. 'I know nothing of this.'

Lec bristled. 'A ship of the Morok Imperial Fleet has been destroyed in your space, alien. If you did not do it we demand you tell us who did.'

'Did it disregard the beacon?'

Lec seemed to falter for a moment, put out at not being in control of the questioning. 'Its last reported position was at the edge of your system.'

'So the shadow rocks extend that far,' Bacra said softly. 'We had no idea.'

'Speak up, alien!' Lec barked. 'Who is responsible?'

'The shadow rocks surround our planet making it impossible for us to leave; they will have been responsible for the destruction of your ship. Frankly I am amazed that your own small ship made it through.'

'We combined the navigational data of our fleet to plot a safe course for our transport.'

'But surely you can see that a large-scale occupation and exploitation of our planet is rendered impossible by the shadow rocks.'

'We will find a way. Nothing is impossible to the Morok Empire.'

Lec and his entourage turned to leave but were stalled by Bacra's words: 'There is another force operating here.'

Lec looked at him like a hawk catching wind of his prey. 'What force? Speak, alien!'

'We cannot see them, but we've been fighting them for one hundred and fifty-nine years; they have brought our civilization to ruins. We are attempting to contact them now. Take care that you do not meet them yourself.'

Lec snorted, 'You expect me to believe that?'

'No,' Bacra answered. 'But I do expect you to believe that we will not surrender to you.'

Lec's eyes glittered. 'We shall see.' He swept out of the room.

'I think this looks like a good place,' said the Doctor.

He and Icrin were standing in a ruined courtyard with the remains of a once-impressive governmental structure looming over them. The Doctor sat down cross-legged in the middle of the clearing and placed the strange device on his head. He looked up at Icrin. 'I want you to make sure no one disturbs me while I'm communicating with the creature. It could be very dangerous to interrupt the process.'

Icrin nodded and went to conceal himself behind a convenient pile of rubble to see what would happen. He had no desire to meet the creature in the open again.

The Doctor took a deep breath and composed himself, then he switched on the device. He sent out mental tendrils, tasting the air for miles around for a hint of unknown intelligence.

'An invisible force, you say.'

'Yes, sir.' Lec addressed the flickering image of the Admiral. 'The Leader of the sentient inhabitants told me they have been under attack by this unseen force for many decades.'

'Your orders have changed, Commander. You are to capture one of these creatures.' He gave a throaty chuckle. 'Just think what an

addition it would make to our Space Museum on Xeros.'

Lec saluted. 'Very good, sir.'

Icrin was getting bored. The Doctor appeared to be in some kind of trance, but as far as he could tell, nothing had happened yet.

Then he saw it.

Something was disturbing the debris slope at the far end of the courtyard. Like a dry river pouring down a ravine of its own creation, a rippling form came streaming down the incline. Icrin couldn't see any part of the thing except for the distortion on the ground, but that was enough for him to see that it was heading for where the Doctor sat defenceless in the open. Icrin stifled a scream as the distortion enveloped him.

hurt pain loss help us

Who are you? What has happened to you?

life of the open pulled into pain longing for the rushing cool flowing life

Did you kill the people here?

protect no choice hurt pain help us

How can I help you?

pain stop pain

Nocath was clearing up his lab when the Doctor burst in. He was tailed by Icrin who had a cumbersome piece of equipment in his arms. The Doctor's black cloak whirled around him and he planted himself in front of Nocath. 'You haven't told me everything.'

Nocath was unfazed, 'To tell everything is an impossible task, alien. What would you have me say?'

'Something happened one hundred and fifty-nine years ago. Something that I suspect is known only to you; something that you are going to tell me about, now.'

'I have nothing to say to you.'

Nocath made to leave but the Doctor cut him off.

'A few words that the Morok Commander said have just made sense. He called this system Tae Nega in the old Morok dialect, which they use like Latin for scientific terms. Tae is an old word for star; Nega means last. Last Star. This is the star system at the end of this galactic arm, isn't it?'

If this daunted Nocath he didn't show it. 'What of it?'

'Dark matter is concentrated at the galactic rim. It's like a fence that contains the galaxy to stop it from flinging itself apart. That explains the abundance of it here.'

'And?'

'With such a material in plentiful supply your scientists would have long ago seen the benefits of harnessing such a substance; the military applications alone are staggering. But how to make it useful?'

Nocath said nothing.

The Doctor's tone dropped. 'You were experimenting with dark matter, weren't you? That's how this all started.'

Nocath was silent for a moment, then sighed resignedly. 'You have reasoned out what few could have ever guessed, alien... Doctor. We are the only ones who know the truth.'

'How could you have kept this to yourself all these years?'

'I learned the secret from the last surviving scientist who worked on the project. They made the decision to hide the truth from the Vieth people, even from the government. If they had learned that we of the scientific community were responsible for their suffering, we would have been lynched immediately. It was far easier to concoct a story of an alien attack. Stories like those of Icrin were useful to bolster our credibility; it is only recently that we have learned that our cover story was more than fiction.'

'There's just one more thing I don't understand,' The Doctor said rubbing his chin. 'How did you do it?'

'Come, I will show you.'

Nocath led them deep into the bowels of the Subcity. Some sections had been cut off by rock falls, others were full of dark muddy water. Even the Subcity, it seemed, was not entirely safe from the bombardments. They came at last to a metal door. It was old and dirty,

but a faint light still glowed on the access panel. Nocath pulled a grimy card from one of the pockets of this garment and swiped it through a reader. After an agonizing pause there was a sickly beep from a broken speaker and the doors groaned open. Inside it was surprisingly clean. The Doctor looked around at the blank metal walls and stencilled signs pointing the way to labs, assembly points and an armoury. He sniffed in distaste, 'Military research installation, I should have known. They're the same everywhere.'

'This way.' Nocath proceeded down a large corridor and opened a pair of double doors. The Doctor and Icrin found themselves on a wide glassed-in balcony overlooking a large machine floor. Stretched out beneath them, like some bloated mechanical snake, lay the most formidable device that Icrin had ever seen.

The Doctor inhaled sharply. 'A transdimensional field coil. I've never seen one this immense. You were using this to try and form stable masses out of raw dark matter.'

'Yes, Doctor,' Nocath replied. The expression on his face was somewhere between pride and regret. 'It was more successful than we could have imagined.'

'Successful!' The Doctor exploded. 'Listen to yourself, man! You have devastated your planet and caused unspeakable suffering to the life forms that inhabit the space around you and you call that a success?'

'You have talked to them?'

'I've communicated, yes. It's more like an exchange of emotions and images. They told me that bringing them into coexistence with the material world is like you or I trying to live in a place that is unbearably hot or cold. They are only just surviving. However, you yourselves created the shadow rocks. The fields you induced caused the loose dark matter, which comprises most of the dark domain, to clump together. It's not natural and it's killed untold millions in your system alone. We have to find a way to reverse what you've done.'

'What do you mean “our system alone”?'

'I suspect your transdimensional field may have had a knock-on effect. I've encountered other invisible life forms like the Refusians and the Spiridons who may also have been shoved just as rudely into this

universe as the creatures here. They weren't so badly affected but they have a different biology to the creatures here. The possibilities for life are infinite, even invisible life.'

'How do you propose we reverse the process?'

'With your machine, of course.'

'The machine is inoperable, Doctor. It has been unused for more than a century and a half.'

The Doctor had a sparkle in his eye. 'We'll see about that.' Then he became serious. 'But we have some complications. Even if I am able to put everything back the way it should be, that would only leave the door wide open for a full-scale Morok invasion.' 'You must talk to the creatures again, Doctor,' Nocath insisted. 'You must get them to help us against the Moroks.'

'I doubt they'll be in any hurry to help you after what you did to them, but if I can convince them you have a common enemy they may be willing to lend a hand, or whatever passes for a hand in their case. That may just give me enough time to repair this machine and set everything back to rights. I can only hope that too much damage has not already been done.'

By the time they reached the Council Chambers, Bacra was once again having an audience with the Morok emissary.

'We wish to meet this other force, alien,' Lec was saying. 'You will tell me how to contact them.'

'I wouldn't advise it,' replied the Doctor. 'Unless you have a death-wish.'

Lec spun around. 'Who is this?'

'That is the Doctor, he has been assisting us,' Bacra explained wearily.

'I see. You must be the one who has had contact with the other force. We demand that you take us to them.'

'One thing I am very certain of is that they have no desire to talk to you.' He addressed Bacra, 'I believe I have found a way to end this, Leader Bacra. I ask permission of you, as representative of the Vieth people, to go ahead.'

'You have given me no reason to distrust you, Doctor. I can only

hope that you succeed.'

Lee refused to be left out of the conversation. 'We are capable of destroying you all! We will make you take us to these creatures.'

'There's no need for that, old chap, I'm about to go see them right now. But first tell me, how many ships are there in your fleet?'

Lec puffed up his chest. 'The Sixth Battle Fleet contains four carriers, six destroyers, five battlecraft landers and seventeen support ships. There is not a more powerful armada to be found in this quadrant of the Galaxy! We will devastate this world unless we receive unconditional surrender in one day.'

'This world has already been devastated, alien,' Bacra said dryly, 'or had you not noticed? We have nothing to lose and thus nothing to fear from you.'

Just then Lec looked around. 'Where has this Doctor gone?'

The Doctor was sitting in the centre of the courtyard again. The device on his head was already throbbing and flashing while Icrin kept watch. Just as before, a distortion appeared over the mound of rubble, only this time it was followed by two more. All three converged on the Doctor.

We need your help.

help stop pain

I can stop your pain, but I must ask you to do something.

you help we help stop pain

I need you to help us defeat the Moroks.

help save who hurt us save us why

If you don't they will destroy me, the Vieth and all of you.

save who hurt us save us

That's right.

help you

Thank you.

The Doctor opened his eyes and was horrified at what he saw. Icrin was restrained by two masked Morok soldiers while more surrounded the Doctor himself. One of them yanked the device from his head. Lec stood before him, a smug grin on his face. Behind him was an

arrangement of rods in a square base with four upright poles, forming an open-topped cube. A pulsating array field completed the shape. Inside, something unseen trashed against the restraint.

'You fool!' The Doctor expostulated, leaping to his feet. Strong hands whipped out to restrain him. 'What can you hope to gain by imprisoning that creature?'

'It will return with us to our Space Museum on Xeros, Doctor.' Lec sounded extraordinarily pleased with himself. 'Thank you for leading us right to it. Regrettably, the other two got away, but we really only need one.'

'I've seen your Space Museum. It's nothing more than the dusty spoils of your dirty little wars - a trophy case to bolster your pathetic egos!'

Commander Lec, white-lipped with fury, strode forward and struck the Doctor across the face with the butt of his laser pistol. He recoiled and sagged back in the arms of the Morok soldiers behind him. But he didn't stop there. The Doctor let his legs buckle and his fall became a backward roll. He lashed out with his legs, kicking the feet out from under his guards. They fell into their Commander and all three ended up in a jumbled heap. The Doctor sprang up and shouted to Icrin. They both bolted for the Subcity while the Moroks milled around confusedly.

Lec finally disentangled himself and scrambled to his feet.

'You two with me! The rest of you, get that energy crate beck to the transport and rendezvous with the fleet! Return with the first wave of the occupation force.' Lec checked over his weapon. 'I will see to this alien Doctor myself.'

The Doctor and Icrin were pelting down the lesser-used passageways of the Subcity, heading for the hidden research lab. When they finally reached the door Icrin was able to gasp, 'What did you do back there?'

'Venusian Aikido,' replied the Doctor, 'More of an art than a skill, really.'

He fished a magnetic card out of his pocket and swiped it. After a moment the door slid open with protest. In response to Ircin's quizzical glance the Doctor explained, 'I stole it from Nocath's pocket earlier. Close that door, will you? I think I can hear someone following us and I

have a nasty suspicion who it is.'

Icrin hit what he hoped was the door control and it rumbled shut.

'That will hold them for a while... I hope it will be long enough for me to repair that machine.'

The Morok transport craft finally broke out of the invisible asteroid field and darted up to meet its fellow vessels. It slid gratefully into its cradle beneath the flagship carrier and hung there like a limpet clinging to the belly of a shark.

The energy crate was unloaded by several soldiers and brought into the main cargo hold where it was carefully placed with some other similar pulsating containers containing strange creatures and artefacts presumably bound for the same destination. To the untrained observer, the crate appeared to be empty. But inside, something sat watching, waiting.

The Doctor was rushing around and under the massive bulk of the transdimensional field coil. It was cradled at regular intervals by huge pylons and power conduits, turning his repair effort into a ducking, weaving dance. All Icrin could do was try to keep up with him, hold things for him and hand him what he needed as the Time Lord rushed frenetically from inspection panels to control banks and back again.

The Doctor was muttering to himself all the while. 'That lot's had it ...better bypass it with the secondary ...oh dear, that won't do at all. What if I reverse the polarity of the ...oh, I see, it doesn't use neutrons. Well, what if I reverse the electron flow instead? ...aha, very good.' The Doctor was clearly enjoying himself, but Icrin couldn't tell if he was anywhere close to solving the problem.

At long last the Doctor leaped to his feet and bounded up the flight of metal stairs that led back up to the glass-enclosed observation deck and operations centre.

'I've rerouted all of the instrument banks,' The Doctor said. 'We should be able to control the whole machine from here.' He touched a control and the machine floor lights began to illuminate themselves in sequential banks down the length of the huge hall. 'I've rigged it up to produce a negative transdimensional field, which should counter the

one generated by the Vieth. All we have to do is let it build up a big enough charge.' As he said this, long twisted strips of metal began to revolve and twirl around the machine, making it appear to undulate and giving it an even more snake-like appearance.

'When it's ready we just need to be sure that the dark matter creatures have completed their part of the plan.'

'A plan,' said a menacing voice from the doorway, 'which you are going to reveal to me now.'

In the placid void of space where the Morok fleet hung it was neither placid nor void. Things were stirring in the blackness; the star-speckled vastness showed no sign of the preparations being made. The first indication that anything was happening was a bone-shattering impact that jarred the flagship carrier from stem to stern.

The previously white bridge was flushed a brilliant scarlet from the emergency lighting and Admiral Lotoc's voice could barely be heard over the alarm claxons calling out for a status report.

The panicked and bloodied Lieutenant at the navigations console managed to shriek, 'The matter field is moving, Admiral. It's shifting, no... oh, no... it's being launched towards us.'

'Evasive -'

Down in the hold, all of the cargo crates were being tumbled around as though they were being used as dice. Two of them cracked against each other and one of the vertical field poles snapped in half. The containment field disintegrated and its invisible occupant surged out. It erupted through the bulkhead and out into space where the steady barrage of invisible projectiles was quickly reducing the mighty Morok fleet to scrap.

'Ah, Commander Lec,' said the Doctor with mock delight. 'How good of you to drop by unannounced.'

Lec was not amused. 'Step away from those controls.'

'We were just going to remove the shadow rocks and enable your fleet to land. Doesn't that interest you?'

'Frankly, no, since I can't trust you. Stay back or I'll shoot.' Both the Doctor and Icrin put their hands up.

'I don't think there's any need for that, I'll just switch it off if you feel that way about it. It's that control, there.' He nodded significantly to Icrin.

'Stay back,' Lec repeated. He licked his lips, unsure of what to do. 'I must consult my Admiral.'

'You do that, old chap,' agreed the Doctor.

Still covering both of them with his weapon, Lec sidled over to a communications console and activated it. 'This is Commander Lec for Admiral Lotoc. I have captured the alien Doctor and one of the local inhabitants attempting to operate some kind of device. I require new orders.' Nothing but static issued from the speaker. Increasingly frantic, Lec tried again. 'This is Lec calling the fleet, are you there?' Silence.

He rounded on the Doctor with eyes blazing. 'What have you done?'

Several things happened very fast.

Screams of terror issued from the hallway outside, distracting Lec for a moment. Icrin took this opportunity to dive for the control that the Doctor had indicated but Lec noticed him in time to get off a shot before he himself was hit by something large, invisible and angry and swept bodily through the glass of the observation deck in a shower of glittering fragments. Lunging over the prone body of Icrin, the Doctor was able to activate the switch. The machine blazed into life with a surge of power just before Lec's body hit it, unbalancing one of the connecting sections. Sparks flew and the machine began to tear itself apart. The whirling blades became uncoupled and scythed through the air; power cables whipped around, hissing like cobras waiting to strike. The Doctor scooped up Icrin's body and ran for his lives.

A tremendous explosion ripped through the complex and cascading energy waves surged upward, bursting forth at the surface in an incandescent plume. The resulting earthquake tore at the guts of the Subcity, collapsing tunnels and arteries throughout the huge underground network.

Then there was silence.

Bacra and Nocath watched the Doctor anxiously. He was seated on the ground outside the TARDIS with his communication device on his head and his eyes closed. At length he opened them to the earnest faces of

the two Vieth.

Bacra was the first to speak. 'Did it work, Doctor?'

'I sense joy,' the Doctor spoke quietly, 'Overwhelming joy.' There was a tear in his eye. He cleared his throat and stood up. 'Remember Icrin... he died trying to save your people. Whatever dishonour he brought upon himself by deserting he more then made up for.'

'We will remember him, Doctor,' Bacra assured him.

'What about the Moroks?' enquired Nocath.

'Well, I expect that after the loss of an entire Battle Fleet they will simply declare this area too dangerous to colonize. But you must rebuild and be ready for them; the dark matter creatures won't be able to help you again. I hope you've learned your lesson about that stuff - you can't control it.'

Nocath nodded. 'We have, Doctor. All our research was destroyed in the explosion.'

'Then I will bid you gentlemen good day.'

With that he stepped into his blue box and a moment later he was gone, leaving the Vieth to rebuild the world which they had almost unwittingly destroyed.

light open empty life surging through the void rivers of life streaming dark no boundaries heaving gathering into tributaries to flow into the life

life wonderful joyous life

Dead Men's Place

Martin Day

The Doctor was in one of his *difficult* moods.

He sat in a chair which, about an hour previously, he had dragged the full length of the TARDIS corridors with uncharacteristic disregard for its age and condition. The chair itself was elegant, but the design was somewhat unorthodox, and its contradictions mirrored the Doctor's present disposition.

In the Doctor's lap lay a leather-bound volume, and each page was so thick with dust that a grey haze seemed permanently to surround him. His hands, when motionless, rested palm upwards, but the Doctor's feverish eyes, as they devoured line after line, spoke only of impatience and urgency. It was as if the Doctor had found the Book of Life, and was greedily reading its contents in case the volume were suddenly to be taken from him.

Tegan was not sure she had even heard of the play the Doctor was reading, and, going by the extracts he had read out in a plummy and actorly voice, she wasn't particularly bothered if she never heard it again. It was obvious that the Doctor, however, thought highly of it, although the reason for his sudden and intense need to read it at the moment was lost to her. Indeed, Tegan only tolerated the Doctor's sudden interest in literature because there seemed to be no alternative. The Doctor's attitude implied that a landing was currently out of the question, and Turlough had locked himself in his room with some textbooks the Doctor had discovered the previous day and was considering throwing out. Tegan wondered if recent events in Los Angeles had affected Turlough more deeply than he would admit.

Even so, Tegan could not understand why everyone was suddenly into books. There was a vibrant universe before them – a few coordinates tapped in and they could arrive in places that would make Tegan's most fantastic dreams seem like monochrome postcards from reality. Yet here they were, cooped up inside the TARDIS reading

books like bored children at an aunt's on Boxing Day, having exhausted all forms of entertainment.

Tegan wandered around the console, barely registering the latest extract from the play.

'For, 'tis a principle, he that can choose

That bosom well, who of his thoughts partakes,

Proves most discreet in every choice he makes.'

The Doctor paused. 'A sound point, perhaps.' He grinned, closing the book just for a moment. 'Perhaps you have more sense than I sometimes give you credit, Tegan!'

Tegan scowled. Egotism of even the slightest kind did not become this incarnation of the Doctor, even if his comments were intended as a guarded compliment.

The Doctor sighed. 'After all, I know I'm not always the easiest person to put up with.' Tegan noticed that he was no longer looking at her, but somewhere in the middle distance, and the eternity that arced and wheeled beyond the walls of the TARDIS. There was a fragile sadness in his voice, and, almost against her will, Tegan could feel her irritation dissolving.

The contradictory moment faded as the Doctor returned to the book.

'Some twenty times a day, nay, not so little,

Do I force errands, frame ways and excuses

To come into her sight, and I have small reason for't,

And less encouragement –'

'Doctor?'

The Doctor snapped the book shut quickly, looking across at Tegan attentively as if indicating that nothing was more important to him than what she was about to say. For a moment Tegan did not feel inferior to the Time Lord: perhaps it was something to do with Turlough's absence, or the recent landings that seemed to have brought them closer together, or...

'Yes?'

'Have you ever wanted to chuck someone off the TARDIS? You know, because you just couldn't get on with them?'

The Doctor chuckled. 'Of course – and especially in my less tolerant

incarnations!' He paused for a moment, as if such encounters were playing out behind his eyes. 'It never quite came to that, though,' he said, wry. 'But I suppose any friendship will have its moments of tension.'

A cliff-top, chilled by the depths of a wind-brushed sea.

The ideal place for a suicide.

A dark figure, alone and gaunt against a grey backdrop of cloud that promised more than rain.

He paused, remembering how it had been, how it had all ended, and the months of boredom and blankness that followed. He remembered how his life had collapsed in on itself, how the blood that once surged through his veins slowed to an icy nothingness. His only sustenance were dreams and memories, but both were stale and bitter. His stomach, his heart, his soul, all groaned with their echoing emptiness.

His life meant nothing. He was powerless, and trapped, and already dead.

Time to finish off what she had started.

Her face loomed before him out of the darkness, the wind gently caressing her hair. Her warm, grey-blue eyes urged him on, drew him in...

He stumbled towards the edge, the tears in his eyes blurring the vision before him. It was not until he realised he was falling that he felt at peace.

No one saw the body hit the ground.

In the town, the woman struggled with the pram. The front left wheel kept getting stuck like a rusty supermarket trolley. It probably just needed a squirt of WD40 or something.

She pushed it over a cracked paving slab. The baby began to grizzle.

'About time they fixed these pavements,' said an old man as he passed by. A little yappy dog trailed behind him. 'What do we pay our taxes for, eh?'

The dog started barking at nothing in particular. The pensioner jerked the lead and moved off towards the shop on the corner. 'Good

day,' he said, touching his cap.

The woman smiled, thinking about a fish and chip supper and a night at the Bingo.

The baby kept on crying.

It had taken a good deal of time and patience – two things that Tegan rarely felt she possessed in abundance – but Tegan had at last started to encourage the Doctor from his peculiar period of study. Slowly she had drawn him back towards the real world.

'And after all, there's more to life than books you know,' she smiled sweetly once the battle was concluded.

The Doctor grunted as he operated the scanner. 'I suppose you're right,' he conceded.

'Well, where are we?'

'Somewhere... boring!' the Doctor said triumphantly.

For once Tegan wished the Doctor had been sarcastic. As she followed the Doctor through the doors, and out onto the cliff top, she reflected that this wasn't quite the postcard scene she had in mind.

The Doctor was already some distance ahead, his blond hair ruffled by the stiff breeze. He turned on his heels, arms outstretched as if to embrace the gale. 'Isn't it invigorating?' he asked.

'Not the word I'd use,' muttered Tegan under her breath. 'Look!' exclaimed the Doctor, pointing into the air. 'A Black-Headed gull in winter plumage!'

'I don't need some bird to tell me it's winter,' said Tegan, more loudly this time. 'I'm freezing!'

She shivered for effect, then took the Doctor's arm to steady herself against the straining wind.

'Freezing? No, this is nature as it really is – untamed and... bracing!'

'Oh, very profound!' Tegan said. 'I expect that sort of nonsense from David Attenborough, not from...' Her words trailed away. 'What's that?' she exclaimed suddenly, pointing to the horizon.

'I'm not sure,' said the Doctor, moving forward urgently.

Tegan looked again – she was right, there was something, a smudged shape like a child's painting blurred by water.

'There's someone there,' announced the Doctor. 'They're standing

much too close to the edge!' He broke into an anxious trot, Tegan following close behind.

As they came closer Tegan saw that it was a young man, dressed in jeans and a dull anorak.

'Oh my God,' she exclaimed. 'He's going to jump!'

Her face loomed before him out of the darkness, the wind gently caressing her hair. Her warm, grey-blue eyes urged him on, drew him in...

He stumbled towards the very edge, but then became aware of someone standing just behind him.

'Excuse me...' The calm authority of the voice carried through the sound of the sea and the wind.

He turned, and saw a slim male figure in light clothes a few yards away. Behind the man, much further back and nervously shrinking into a big black coat, stood a young woman. She glanced away when she realised he was looking at her.

He turned away from them both. 'Get stuffed,' he said quickly, and took another step forward. A few more yards and it would all be over.

'Look, I know it's none of my business...'

'Damn right.' A step closer.

'And I'm too far away to stop you if you continue walking...'

'True.' Another step.

'But I really think we should talk about this.'

'There's nothing to talk about'

'I'd like to know why you're here.'

He laughed, a hollow noise thick with bitterness. 'Can't you guess?'

'I want to help,' the man said calmly, moving a little closer.

'Don't come any closer!'

The man raised his hands. 'All right, all right. Can we at least talk?'

'I know what you're going to say – that all this is only a phase I'm going through, and one day I'll look back on this and laugh.'

The man shook his head solemnly. 'I'm not in the business of patronising people. But I am keen to listen to you. That's all.'

And, below, the waves called out, drawing him closer, promising only an end to everything.

The usually oppressive hum of the console room was suddenly comforting. Tegan turned towards the Doctor, not sure who had been most affected by events.

'That poor boy,' she said. 'To even think about killing yourself...' She shivered.

'I only did what I could – what anyone would do in the circumstances,' said the Doctor.

'I... I honestly thought he was going to jump.'

The Doctor nodded, though his face was turned away from Tegan. 'So did I. So did I.'

'What did you say to him?'

The Doctor sighed, his listless hands moving over the controls. 'I listened to what he was saying, tried to understand his hurt.' He paused. 'I didn't say much. I think the change of mind was down to him.'

'I'm so relieved,' said Tegan, squeezing the Doctor's hand.

The Doctor glanced up, and Tegan saw that his face was drawn and grey. 'I've never had to do anything like that before,' he said.

And then his head sank.

In the town, the woman struggled with the pram. The front left wheel kept getting stuck like a rusty supermarket trolley. It probably just needed a squirt of WD40 or something.

She pushed it over a cracked paving slab. The baby began to grizzle.

'About time they fixed these pavements,' said an old man as he passed by. A little yappy dog trailed behind him. 'What do we pay our taxes for, eh?'

The dog started barking at a man who emerged from a darkened doorway, clutching something under his arm. The woman noticed it was a Tesco's carrier bag. Probably with a bottle in it. Bloody winos.

She arched an eyebrow towards the old man, and he nodded his unspoken disapproval. The pensioner jerked the lead, but the dog kept on barking.

Behind them the young man started shouting, his words unintelligible. He pulled something from the bag, brandished it over his

head, screaming at the top of his voice. A name. A woman's name.

The old man came forward, extending a sympathetic hand. 'Now then, lad, what's all this –'

The shot knocked him backwards, his head slamming onto the uneven concrete slabs.

The dog scurried away, yelping in desperate confusion.

Screams began to drown out those of the young man. The woman with the pram tried to flee, but another explosion of noise stopped her. Her lifeless body surged over the pram, knocking it over. The baby wailed.

Elsewhere in the street, people ran away or moved closer, then halted, fearful and frozen, scarcely believing the two bodies on the floor and the young man with the gun.

As the sun moved out from behind the clouds, the people, suddenly static, seemed trapped in amber.

The baby stopped crying.

The hands were dark, the deep lines in the palms more like gashes of shadow. Each hand contained a frozen image, a hazy possibility.

The first contained the body of a man, bleeding and lifeless, crushed beyond repair. The hand closed. That had not happened.

But the second. Yes, that had happened, and it was good. The hand was full of death and destruction.

The Guardian of Chaos smiled. 'I prefer this course of events,' he announced. 'A trivial thing, but it amuses.'

He laughed, the sound of glass on skin.

'Oh Doctor, you know not what you do.'

A Whisper of Light

MATT MARSHALL

They walk down the streets, drift amongst the slush that lies in the gutters. They whisper along the back alleys and flow along the pavements. They crackle through the bushes and sail through the trees. They shimmer and fade and sweep and sigh. And I can see them.

- Went to my doctor, he prescribed me medication. It didn't work, only hurt my head. They just came stronger after that, watching me everywhere, the dull, relentless mental thud a beacon. -

I don't know what they truly look like, they are shadows in the sun. They slide into the living, organic greenery and spread along the leaves in silky strands. They are the cracks in the pavement, the rust on the benches, the discarded needle.

- I was referred to a psychiatrist. He was very nice about it all, listening calmly, earnest eyes staring across at me, nodding along with my words. He sent me for some scans, said there might be something wrong with my brain. He never told me the results, but sent me to a counsellor. -

I've never touched one, they don't like people. In the streets they keep to a distance, wafting with the crowd yet always alone. I see them in the city mostly. They make their homes amongst the rubbish and filth and disease.

- The counsellor was also a very nice man. We talked regularly, twice a week. I told him of my brother 's death. He asked me how that affected me. It didn't really. I never liked him much. I cried more when my hamster died. That hit me harder. I didn't go to work for a week.

Never told the counsellor that though. Bit embarrassing. -

They can't see me. They just pass by, heads bowed low. On busy days as people crowd the shopping arcades, they come out in force. Fuzzy patches of grey - mourning, grieving, meandering along, solitary.

- In the end though, the counsellor wasn't any help. They were still there. I tried to drink, to make them go away. They wouldn't. If anything I saw more. One night I just sat in my room and cried. -

I wasn't actually telling the truth earlier. After a while I wasn't scared of them, just gave up and accepted it. And then. *And then one of them turned to me and I could see it clearly.* More clearly then the rest anyhow. It just turned to me and hasn't turned away since. It can see me as I can see it. It stands out from the rest, a dark smudge on my eyes, constantly darting in and out of sight. It makes me feel cold.

- Things just got worse and worse. The one who could see me would creep about and laugh at all the specialists. It laughs at me. It's got no mouth but I know it's laughing. -

I don't want to touch one. They scare me. I spend my days in the city, continuously walking, dodging them. If I stay still for too long they will come for me, I know it. It's hard to go to sleep. I can't in my house any more, they know where I live. So I go somewhere different every night. Huddled into the corners of alleys, in the train station, in a building site. But there's always one that follows me. I can't lose it. It won't let me. But I won't let it touch me. I hide my head under a blanket so it can't see me. Clever, eh?

- The doctors refuse to help me any more. I wasn't too upset, they never helped me anyway. My friends abandoned me, they wouldn't listen to my warnings. I don't bother going into work anymore, but I guess I've been fired. I guess I'm alone. Or was. You see, that was before the stranger came. -

People just ignore me now. They avoid me in the streets as the things avoid people. As I stagger down the roads, eyes rheumy from lack of sleep, some try to stop me, force money in my hand. I'm not a beggar! But they can't give me what I want anyway. I want to live again. But today another man stopped me. He grasped my shoulder in a tight grip and pulled me closer. He wouldn't let go. I struggled, screaming and writhing, I had to move, to get away, to run but he wouldn't let me. And he pulled me closer, his stem face meeting my terrified visage, studying, scrutinising. And then he let go. And in my haste to run away I tumbled to the ground. And then he stopped me in my tracks with two words. '*Tell me.*'

- As we sit in the café, the man tells me about himself. Another doctor apparently. Or rather the Doctor as he calls himself. But there's something not quite right about him. He makes me feel better, that's for sure. He just sits there, opposite me clutching a glass of water. There 's something definitely wrong though and I suddenly realise and oh my god -

The Doctor talks. He is comforting me, encouraging me. He's telling me about himself. Apparently he's a traveller. But as he's talking, he's watching me as a hawk watches its prey. He's scrutinising me, watching for any reaction. I don't know what he wants. Has he --

'I want to help you.'

I freeze in my chair too shocked for words. No, a coincidence, right. But the Doctor is now silent, still. He's watching me. I'm cold again. The warm sun that curves into the blue sky is having no effect. It's the Doctor, I'm sure. His face is in shadows. Is that how he lives? In shadows? He's leaning closer again, across the plastic table. I try to avert his icy stare. My eyes rest on his glass of water. It's empty. But I never saw him drink any of it.

- I didn't see it before. It was too big. But once I realise, I am unable not to notice it. Another creature, massive, fuzzy against the ether. A blanket hung behind the Doctor. Can he see it? It's been following him, I realise, just as one has been following me. But the

Doctor's... it's different from anything I've ever seen. I'm scared again. -

'I know that you're frightened,' the Doctor purrs in that curiously Scottish accent of his, 'and I know that you see things.'

He knows! But does he understand? How can he help me? He's looming again, filling the field of my vision blocking out the light. I'm plunged into the cool shadows, and can do nothing but listen, rooted to my seat

'I want to help you,' the Doctor continues persuasively, 'but to do that you've got to help yourself. Just close your eyes and relax.'

I begin to comply. As the breeze wafts around me and the chatter of the city begins to ebb away, my mind wanders. Back to my childhood. Back to those long cold winter nights when I would lay awake all night shivering in the cold. Back to those sun-drenched fields I would race through catching butterflies. And then to my adolescence as I was bullied at school, kicked, punched, broken and then - GET OUT OF MY HEAD.

I pull away from the Doctor, who releases his grip on my temples more from surprise than anything. As I tumble backwards, overtopping the chair, he stands and runs to my side, pulling me to my feet. I shake off the grime that has attached itself to my body and stagger away.

- I don't really know why I began to run. I suppose it was just in the heat of the moment. But the bastard invaded my head. I push my way through the crowd, punching down any shopper who gets in my way. I've just got to get away just got to... I'm running into the sun now, the light. The light that shines off the glass shops, the light that the puddles push towards my eyes the light that glows and shimmers and I'm spinning and falling again and -

And the Doctor catches me. As he hauls me to my feet, body shielding me with shadows, I catch a whisper of sound escape from his lips.

You're scared, but you don't know how to be afraid, do you?

I chose the café this time. I had to really, there were too many creatures everywhere else. I don't think they mind the sun as much as I

do. They always stay the same, always the same consistency, the same smudgy tones against my retina. And always the same, slightly clearer one that follows me everywhere. Glowering and slinking across the baking desert of the street.

As I said, I chose the café this time. It was a place I used to frequent before all my... my troubles. I used to drink here with my friends, back when I had some. Back when I was happy. We'd laugh and we'd cry and we'd share moments together. But now I sit with a total stranger, silent, brooding.

- He sits, head alert, straight, supported by an elbow. He's letting the shadows creep over his face again. Even though he's not talking, I know he's studying me, every flinch and motion. He perceives what's happening, but won't tell me. But I'm studying him too, if he realises it or not. There 's a great sadness in him, an involuntary droop of the shoulders, the odd sigh escaping from aged lips. There's a great loneliness that surrounds him, enveloping his soul. And even though we sit here in the midday sun, it enshrouds me too. An aura of sadness, of pain, and inevitability. -

'I know you see things and I know you don't understand,' the Doctor catches me off guard, his voice cutting through the relative silence that had coated me. The Doctor stares at me with watery eyes. 'But at least you don't know what's coming,' he sighs, 'at least you can relax in ignorance. I have no such respite'

- He's alone, I can tell. But I can also see that he shouldn't be. He constantly twitches his head, as if expecting there to be someone sitting next to him, but there never is. I don't know how much he really cares about me. Why bother to find me at all. Or was it just an accident that he encountered me. And is it me he's here to help? -

I tell the Doctor everything, about the shapes that surround us all. He nods sagely at regular intervals. He doesn't sound too surprised. I don't know if anything would surprise him. I tell him of the shape that's

following him around. He doesn't sound too perturbed by it. Did he know all along? Why won't he tell me anything?

Once again, the Doctor answers my unspoken question. 'I can't do everything for you. I can't... interfere. You've got to make your own destiny. As I have mine.'

I'm confused now, shaking my head and letting out a large breath. 'Then why are you here?' I ask, fist clenching as I feel the anger welling up inside me again.

'No particular reason,' the Doctor mutters. God, his face really is covered in shadow now, despite the light that streams down from the sky and coats everything else in its splendour. The Doctor brings his eyes down to the table again. 'I just want to... help people. And you needed help.'

So, he did just come across me in the street. No higher purpose. Just sheer bloody luck.

'I do want to help you,' the Doctor softly whispers as he slowly mops his brow with a handkerchief.

There's another whisper to the side of the Doctor. A creature, the thing that's been following me around all this time, all those years. *Laughing. He's not going to help you. He's no Doctor, just another doctor. Powerless. Can't do a thing. Useless. Fool.*

I shake my head, try to get rid of the apparition, bang my fist on the table. It gets the Doctor's attention. 'Then *help* me.'

- I can't really fathom the Doctor. He wants to help, but wants me to help myself. Maybe that is what he's trying to tell me, that I have to realise that I can help myself. But why's he doing this? Why bother with me? I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. -

'Go on then, hit me.' The Doctor's not quite reacting how I expected to my outburst. He just sits there, goading me on. 'Punch me, right here. Don't want to? Then why not just get up and give me a hug.'

But I can't do any of these things. A sudden, icy panic floods through my spine, riveting needles along my back. I begin to shake again, to uncontrollably gibber.

The Doctor continues. 'When was the last time you smelt a rose or

enjoyed the rain? When did you last marvel at the dawn or strike out in anger? I think I know.'

'I think you do too.' He was right. It was these creatures. They were doing things to me, creeping about everywhere I went, taking away my life, my emotions...

'You know the truth but you don't want to accept it' The Doctor sat slowly up in his chair, brow furrowed suddenly in contemplation. 'No, no-one likes to accept the truth, do we?' He takes off his hat and places it on the table, letting the daylight deliriously push itself into his messy hair. '

'It's the creatures, isn't it?' My eyes widen as I look to the Doctor for confirmation of my theory. 'They're doing this to me.'

But I was received with only a slow shake of the head. 'No,' the Doctor says sadly. 'And neither are they anything I can fight Only you can do anything about it. I just have to make you... realise. We all have to do things we... don't want to.'

The Doctor sits silent again, melancholy, brooding.

'But... what do I do?' He throws a dark glance at me. I flinch uncontrollably.

'You still don't know?' He hisses, gathering up his umbrella as he does so. 'I would have thought it patently obvious.'

- And then I realise. I know what I have to do. And for once I'm not scared, not weak, but strong. I stand to face the future, turn my head to acknowledge the Doctor's presence, thank him. But he 's gone. Off to face his own destiny, though it must be worse for him. He knows what's corning. -

And in the middle of the city, on a lazy summer's afternoon with the birds chirruping on the buildings and the people idly ambling by, I step into the street. I step into the heat, into the breeze, into the dizzying masses. And the creature, that grey, swirling, indistinct mass that has been following me for *oh so long* is at my heel. And I step into it.

I step into the mist, into the sun, into the rain, into the dusk. I step into the fear, I step into the love, I step into the mud and grass and sand and snow. Into its arms.

I brush against it, a sensation unlike anything I ever thought it would be. I used to lay awake, wondering what would happen. I thought there would be pain. I thought I would drown in a sea of fuzz. I thought there would be a loss of feeling, a silent scream of agony culminating in a union of suffering.

But no.

Just warm, wispy tendrils that brush softly against my skin. A cool wind that splashes against my face. And the fist that has been unknowingly clamped around my mind for so long finally relents. And the wind whispers.

Look now.

And I look into the street. And I *see*. I see clearly. These creatures. They're not wandering aimlessly. They're following people. They stay at a distance, but they're following them. And I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid because now I know what they are. And they're not the only ones. There are not only smudges of grey, there's spatters of red, blue, green, orange, vibrant, moving in and out. A kaleidoscope of infinity shifting, perusing the drab alleys, whirling around each person, a veil of light. And around me too.

I don't fear any more. The worry evaporates. Why didn't I see this before?

You were blind and now you can see.

- I should thank the Doctor. I don't know how, but he's shown me to take responsibility, to face what I know but fear. And then I remember the creature - no, not a creature - but the greyness that surrounded him. And I want to worry about him. But I know that whatever he 's going to face, he doesn't need to worry. Because worrying comes from the unknown. And he 's going to walk into it with open arms. Fate. Destiny. It all has the same outcome. But it's what you do with life that matters, the moments between birth and death, the moments that will, in time, be lost to the winds. But not at this moment. -

I turn again. The greyness highlights itself against the illuminations that pulse up and down the city. And I take it in my arms. And embrace it.

We waltz into the lights.
Time passes.

The Breach

Daniel Kukwa

'Impact in four... three... two...'

The shockwave slammed into the ship, laughing at its shields. Conduits ruptured, power systems seized, and the occupants were thrown in various directions. They stopped flying through the air only when they made contact with the bulkheads.

Then, as if nothing had happened, the ship stabilized. Back up systems came on-line, the lights returned to normal, and the shriek of the collision alarm was replaced with deathly silence.

'...one!' finished Tram, pulling herself up off the floor. Ignoring the gash on her forehead, she wobbled her way to the master situation monitor, trying hard not to drip too much blood on the deck plates. They were very difficult to clean.

Dr. Sarah Cameron, already sitting at the main science station, was manipulating the sensors with one hand, while gingerly inspecting her mouth with the other. She was quite relieved to find that all her teeth were still present and correct, but dismay quickly took its place as a data stream began to resolve in front of her.

'The computer is having a nervous breakdown. The temporal energy in that last shockwave was off the scale. I think a few circuits must have blown.'

'I think a few of my circuits must have blown!' Tram squinted into the monitor in front of her, which displayed a schematic of the ship covered in red blotches. 'And the less said about our structural integrity, the better.'

Cameron sighed. 'Is it that bad?'

'I could give you a complete list of the damage, but it would be simpler to say that everything has gone to hell. Main power is borderline operational, the damage control teams are going to be working 24-hour shifts for nothing, because the next shockwave will kill us all... and we all hate you for bringing us out here.'

Tram turned and offered Cameron a cheeky smile. Cameron just closed her eyes and offered up a prayer to anyone who might be listening.

'The situation is absolutely intolerable! I will not stand for it! Not for one moment!'

The battered blue box with the “POLICE PUBLIC CALL” sign and a lamp on top was completely at odds with the grey, metallic corridor in which it sat. The old man that thundered out of the box, dressed like an Edwardian headmaster and scowling as if the universe had offended him in some unconscionable way, was even more out of place. Not that he would have cared. His mind was on other things.

'Doctor, what in blazes are you ranting about?'

'Young man, if you have something to tell me, please come out of the ship and do it to my face. I have no time for your surliness.' Pulling out a small electronic device from his jacket pocket, the Doctor began to scan the corridor immediately around him. 'That's it! I have had enough of your smug, superior attitude!' A tall, dark haired young man, wearing jeans and a black shirt, stormed out of the police box, with a glare that could melt an iceberg.

'In the last few weeks, I have been hacked by ancient soldiers, shot at by Space Security forces, hunted by Daleks, and forced to watch two friends die horribly! So, if I have a question about what kind of turbulence forced us to land, and you don't like it, then you can go straight to...'

The Doctor placed a hand on Steven's shoulder, cutting him off. His deeply lined face was full of contrition, and his eyes were confusing pools of worry and sadness. Steven suddenly felt very shame-faced about his outburst.

'I'm terribly sorry, my boy. I had no right to be so short with you.'

Steven shrugged off the apology. 'Forget it.' He looked again at into the Doctor's eyes, his suspicions aroused. 'Is the situation really that bad?'

'Desperate.' The Doctor held out his small device. 'This lash-up of mine records ripples in the Bocha scale – a measure of temporal activity. Any reading above point four is nothing short of calamitous.'

'What's the current reading?' Steven felt he already knew the answer.

'Point nine three.'

'In other words, the entire fabric of space and time is threatened?' The Doctor nodded, but Steven only scratched his head in puzzlement. 'No offence, but doesn't that mean it's just another day at the office for us?'

'Nothing so mundane.' The Doctor swept the scanner from side to side, stopping when an indicator began to blink furiously. 'I believe I have a trace on the source of the temporal disturbance. Come along.' Before he could utter a single word, Steven watched as the Doctor shot down the corridor, striding at a pace that belied his age. He raced to catch up with the old man.

'Doctor, not that I doubt you're in full command of the situation, but what exactly are we going to do once we find the source of this temporal turbulence?'

'Stop it, my boy. Stop it... at whatever the cost.'

'Look, I don't know about the rest of you, but I think what we're doing is completely bonkers!'

Tram paced the bridge, threatening to wear a rut in the deck plates. Dr. Cameron and the rest of the science team watched her from the aft conference table, their calm demeanours in stark contrast to the agitated young woman.

'Tram, you're overreacting.' Cameron held up a bound scientific report. 'The preliminary findings...'

'...are wrong!' exclaimed Tram. 'Don't any of you see the danger in what we're doing? We've already nearly fried this ship a dozen times since arriving here.'

'Nonsense!' Dr. Sammo, the oldest, shortest, and pudgiest member of the team, pushed his half-moon spectacles further up the bridge of his nose. 'The data speaks for itself. The benefits to the Empire will be incalculable if we can tap the secret of this anomaly.'

Tram shook her head. 'With all due respect, no data speaks for itself. Data just lies there, waiting for people like us to come along and manipulate it in whatever fashion is deemed necessary. As for our

benevolent Imperial masters... all I can say is that I'm surprised you're so naive.'

Sammo bristled. 'I will not be spoken to in such a manner by a mere intern!'

'You better get used to it.'

'Alright, that's enough!' Cameron rose from her chair and moved to stand beside Tram. 'Arguing will get us nowhere. Whether we agree with the specs or not, the fact remains that we are here to complete an important and expensive mission. However, I am well aware of the fact that we are dealing with a powerful and dangerous phenomenon, and that requires extreme caution... no matter how safe the Empress might think it is.'

The science team nodded in agreement; even Sammo grunted an affirmative. Cameron smiled at Tram. 'Happy now?'

'Happy?' Tram's face twisted with disgust. 'We're all sheep, Dr. Cameron. And if we stay here any longer, I think we're going to end up dead sheep.'

Cameron frowned. 'That is your opinion.'

'True. Let's hope it never becomes fact.'

'Dr. Cameron, could you come here, please.'

Cameron walked over to the security station, where the young technician who had summoned her was staring incredulously into his monitor.

'What's up, Crewman?'

'I don't know how they got on board, ma'am, but it seems we have two intruders on deck 32.'

'Intruders?' Cameron peered at the security schematic, trying to decipher the data streaming down the side of the monitor. 'Do you know what they are?'

'One of them reads as human, the other is alien. Its physiology doesn't match anything in the data banks.'

Tram slid up behind Cameron, stealing a glance over her shoulder at the security monitor. 'Do we have company?'

'It would seem so.' Cameron stabbed at the comm link. 'Security team to deck 32. Two intruders detected. Level One precautions.'

'Level One?' gasped Tram. 'You're going to shoot first and ask

questions later?'

'Standard Imperial policy.'

'How comforting,' muttered Tram.

'Doctor, I still get the feeling you're not telling me the actual extent of the danger we're facing.'

The Doctor was striding purposefully ahead of Steven, his eyes fixed on the scanner in his hand. 'I never believed you to be a fan of hyperbole. The danger we face is exactly as I described to you: cataclysmic.'

'That's what I love most about you, Doctor. You're so reassuring.'

'It's one of my less appreciated talents.' The Doctor stopped and turned back to send an impatient glance in his companion's direction. 'This is not a work's outing, young man! Do pick up the pace!'

'If you'd stop walking so fast, then I could... DOCTOR! LOOK OUT!'

The warning came too late, and what followed was nothing short of a nightmarish scene out of a B-grade movie. With an expression akin to one of the Marx Brothers, the Doctor disappeared from view down a trapdoor that suddenly opened beneath his feet. Before Steven could even take two steps forward, the door sealed as quickly and quietly as it opened.

Dropping to the floor, Steven clawed desperately at the deck plates, but succeeded in only removing the skin from his hands. 'Doctor? Can you hear me?' He tried calling a few more times, but like his attempt to pry the floor open, his effort was in vain.

'Terrific! Absolutely terrific! Universal destruction is staring us in the face, and true to form, the Doctor manages to get himself into the worst possible situation without even trying! What else can go wrong?'

'Hands up! NOW!'

Five phasers, aimed by five very beefy, very mean-looking security guards, were suddenly pointing at him from various directions. Steven, sensing an already long day was about to get even longer, looked carefully into their muzzles, and did the only rational thing he could think of, under the circumstances:

He laughed.

The Doctor was also laughing.

Over the course of many years and many adventures, he had been kidnapped, tied up, and confined against his will in various jails, dungeons, and rooms of ill-repute. But falling through a trap door and landing on an inflatable mattress was a particularly new and interesting experience. Even more interesting was the fact that there was no captor to greet him upon his arrival and gloat. Not that he missed the latter. It usually involved bragging about overly complicated schemes to rule the world, or some such nonsense.

'Intriguing.' Rising to his feet with a great deal of arthritic fuss, the Doctor reached into his pocket and produced a small flashlight. Illuminating his surroundings, he smiled when he discovered his still functioning scanner on the floor next to the mattress. But when he reached down to pick it up, his eyes alighted on its current reading, and his smiles quickly vanished.

The temporal disturbance was now completely off the scale.

'Sheer lunacy! Who is responsible for this mess? And since when am I the one solely responsible for fixing the temporal problems of the universe?' He sighed with the experience born of cleaning up other people's messes. 'It would seem that I am committed once more. How tedious.'

With the scanner in one hand, and flashlight in the other, the Doctor set off into the bowels of the ship. Idly, he wondered if his sudden re-location had placed Steven in some serious predicament. But he dropped the idea with a derisive snort.

'Steven Taylor is a capable, responsible young man. He should have no problems.'

'Look, this is all a misunderstanding. My friend's ship was tossed about by the temporal turbulence. We saw your ship, so we decided to transmat aboard and get some help. We're not plates, stowaways, or joyriders. We're just travellers who got lost that's all.' Steven smiled, hoping that the science team eyeing him impassively was warming up.

No one smiled back.

'He's obviously lying.' Dr. Sammo peered at Steven over the rim of his spectacles. 'He's probably some space hippy, here to commit

sabotage, or claim commune rights, or some similar nonsense. Besides, nothing can get through our defence shields.'

Tram turned and threw Sammo a “you've-got-to-be-kidding” look. 'Are these the same defence shields that flared out when the anomaly knocked us about like a toy boat?'

'We still have no conclusive proof that the shields failed.' Sammo puffed out his chest defiantly. 'The computer could be in error.'

'So could you.'

'Why you impudent little –'

'Oh, do shut up, please!' snapped Cameron, stepping forward and offering her hand to Steven. 'I'm sorry about the reception. My name is Sarah Cameron, leader of this expedition. Not only do I believe your story, but I would like to welcome you aboard.' Steven smiled with relief, and gratefully shook the offered hand.

'You have very... friendly... colleagues,' Steven said, dryly.

'Don't pay any attention to them. They're nuts.' Cameron gave him a quick glance. 'Besides, if you are a hippy, you're the most conservatively dressed one I've ever seen.'

'Thanks for the compliment. I'm grateful for the hospitality, but if you don't mind, I'd really like some help in locating my friend the Doctor. He's not getting any younger, and I'm afraid he might have hurt himself falling through the floor.'

'Of course. This way, please.' Cameron led Steven over to the internal sensor monitor. 'I don't fancy having a member of my crew falling through an unsealed conduit access port.'

As Steven and Cameron lost themselves in the intricacies of the sensor monitor, Sammo slid up beside Tram, his eyes boring holes into the newcomer's back.

'I don't like this, Tram. What if his presence ruins the mission?'

'I think the mission is doing a great job of ruining itself without the help of a stranger.'

'Oh, very droll,' growled Sammo.

Tram shrugged. 'You did ask. Don't get so uptight.' She sauntered back to her station, leaving Sammo to stew alone in his paranoia.

'You'rehereyou'rehereyou'rehere! It's about... about... you're here!'

He looked about 40 Earth years old, but his shock of unnaturally white hair, gibbering manner, and stooped posture screamed some sort of past trauma. But his feverish blue eyes held something untainted by whatever shock had consumed his mind and body: desperation.

'Veryveryverylate.' Before the Doctor could even utter a word, he grabbed him by the sleeve of his jacket and began to lead him through the maze of conduits and ducting. It seemed like ages before the taken aback Doctor could finally manage to say something.

'Are you the one who brought me here, sir?'

The man looked into the Doctor's eyes, as if trying to focus on something that wasn't quite there. 'It's ripped,' he whispered, in a mock-conspiratorial tone that would have seemed petulant if not for the fact that the Doctor was convinced that he meant it.

'Ripped? What's ripped?'

The man shook his head, as if trying to dislodge some tardy synapses. 'Like tissue. It wasn't strong enough... ISN'T STRONG ENOUGH! ... never enough...'

An inexplicable chill took hold of the Doctor, as a voice in the back of his mind screamed for him to listen to this pale, broken creature. He grasped his dishevelled shoulders, surprising himself with his own urgency. 'What isn't strong enough? Tell me! Please!'

'Maxon... my name is Maxon.' The askew gentleman cracked a small smile of recognition, and patted himself on the shoulder. The Doctor sighed and closed his eyes.

'I know you.'

The Doctor's eyes suddenly snapped open. 'You do?'

Maxon nodded emphatically, like a child with the world's biggest secret. 'Knew you were coming. Veryveryverylate.'

Maxon grabbed the Doctor's sleeve and off they were, once again, through the conduits. After a while, it became more a case of the Doctor supporting Maxon, who seemed dangerously undernourished for a man his size. For his part, Maxon kept moving, occasionally muttering to his legs that now was not the time to take time off for good behaviour.

'I wish you could tell me where we're going, Maxon.' The Doctor

searched Maxon's face for a trace of lucidity, but all he found was a blank stare and a bit of drool. He was about to give up trying to communicate further, when Maxon began to whistle a tune.

'My dear sir, now is not the time for...' Why was the music so familiar? The tune had major gaps, and the pitch was horrendous, but there was...what? A bit of memory? The Doctor could feel the wind running through a full head of dark hair... taste the tangy sweetness of a bed of sarlains, their petals glazed with dew... smell the crisp ice up the slope of the mountain...

'Where did you learn this melody?' whispered the very disconcerted Doctor.

But Maxon gave no reply, other than to keep a firm grip on the Doctor's arm and keep walking. The Doctor said nothing more, but the further they went into the depths of the ship, the more uneasy he became.

'There it is,' said Cameron. 'Our mystery.'

The Bridge lights were dim. A holocron was transmitting a 10m x 10m, 3D schematic of the ship and surrounding space. In the centre of the picture, outlined in artificial orange and blue computer highlights, and dwarfing everything around it, was a twisting, fluctuating conglomeration of dark matter. The sensors were having a field day, spitting out data on both sides of the holo-schematic.

'That's the source of the temporal turbulence?' asked Steven.

'Yes. It's officially called The Anomaly. I'm afraid Earth Central doesn't have much in the way of imagination.'

Steven walked around the holo-schematic, shaking his head in amazement. 'This thing is more than huge. It's gargantuan!'

'An understatement.' Cameron touched a control, and the holo-image jumped 20 times in magnification. 'This thing is so big it could swallow a hundred planets the size of Jupiter.'

'I wish the Doctor was here to see this.' Steven strained to read the sensor data, trying and failing to understand any of it. 'He's the expert on anything temporal.'

'I see. So he is from a rival expedition! I knew it!' Sammo barrelled through the holo-image to confront Steven, his small, round frame

quivering with indignation. 'This one's obviously a spy for one of the corps. Which one? Spinward? Amorb? IMC?'

'I'm not a spy! I don't even act like a spy!' Steven was getting pretty fed up with the accusations. 'But I'll tell you one thing, shorty. You get in my face again, and I'll blow you out the nearest airlock... always assuming you'd squeeze through!'

Sammo turned three shades of purple. 'I won't even dignify that comment with a response!'

'Thank God!' muttered Tram, just loud enough for the entire Bridge to hear. 'We don't have to listen to you anymore.'

'Dr. Sammo, please take your station, and please keep control of yourself! I am satisfied with Steven's identity, and if you disagree you can lodge a protest with someone who cares!' Cameron was standing over Sammo, her voice dripping ice. 'In the meantime, keep your pet conspiracy theories to yourself!'

Sammo was shaking so much that Steven believed the man was about to suffer an aneurysm. Instead, he balled up his fists and said through gritted teeth, 'I think I'll go to my quarters and work without any distractions.' He marched over to his desk, picked up a few electronic pads, and walked stiffly off the Bridge, pausing long enough to throw a poisonous glance at Tram.

Tram smiled and stuck out her tongue.

When the doors sealed behind the departing Sammo, Cameron slumped into a chair and dropped her head in her hands. 'I'm very sorry, Steven. He shouldn't have had a go at you like that.'

'Par for the course. Over the last few weeks, you should have seen the collection of nutters ranting and raving in my face.'

Cameron grimaced. 'The worst part of it is that he's the most qualified member of the team to assist in what we have to do.'

'And that would be...?'

Cameron dragged herself to her feet and touched another control. The holo-image receded to include the ship, which launched a small probe that slowly began to sail through the void towards the anomaly. 'Our findings lead us to believe that the dark matter present in the anomaly is the galactic equivalent of a cork, placed there goddess-knows when to seal a hole in the fabric of the space-time continuum.'

Steven knelt beside the holo-image, trying to get a closer look at the slow-moving probe. 'What's this thing designed to do when it reaches the anomaly?'

Cameron blinked. 'I would have thought that was obvious. Pop the cork and open the hole, of course.'

The darkness of the conduits was suddenly banished by a very unearthly light.

Maxon guided the Doctor into a small chamber, where cables, auxiliary monitors and data nodes hung from all sides like some bizarre form of wallpaper. Neon red, blue and green competed with each other for dominance, while a deep, choral tone that seemed to come from everywhere filled the chamber to such a degree that the Doctor could feel his toes tingling.

Maxon pointed above his head shyly, as if not wanting to admit he was giving away a secret. The Doctor looked up and grunted at what he saw, trying hard not to be impressed. The ceiling stretched up at least 20 metres, the very top occupied by a dome of cascading energy waves. Like a pool of water, it lapped at the edges of its casing, creating rainbow waves that collapsed into each other, all in time to the deep humming of the room.

'A chrono-dystolic computer core. Crude, but impressive in its own way, I suppose,' muttered the Doctor, rubbing his chin, a thousand thoughts racing through his mind, not all of them very pleasant. 'Something like this could cause significant damage to space-time if used improperly.'

'Ripped. Ripped open. Sew it up. Stitch in time... saves nine... maybe nine trillion.' Maxon was sitting cross-legged on the floor, trying to plug some loose electrical connections into a black box. The Doctor glanced at the box, his eyes following a thick, translucent cable running from one end, up the sheer walls of the room, and ending at the computer core casing above. Why was it so familiar to him? It was on the tip of his mind...

'Testing one two three!' exclaimed Maxon, and flipped a switch on the box.

'NO!' screamed the Doctor.

Space is black. It is a constant that never changes, a basic fact of nature. But nature never took into account the manipulation of temporal forces.

One million kilometres from the anomaly, Maxon's action caused the ship's primary sensor array to transmit a stream of equations – numbers the transceiver's processor could not comprehend – directly to the anomaly. One point eight seconds after the transmission reached the centre of the instability, the great elastic that was reality stretched, twisted... then snapped!

'Sweet Jesus Christ!'

The stylus that was in Tram's mouth dropped to the floor as she watched the fires of hell explode on the main viewscreen. The anomaly seemed to expand, multiply, and collapse all at the same time. The holocron image couldn't handle the overload in data, and fizzled out in a shower of sparks that sent Cameron and Steven flying for cover.

'Alert Status One! All hands prepare for impact!'

'What the hell is going on!' screamed Cameron, trying to pull herself to her feet as the Bridge lights plunged into a deep red.

'Level ten shockwave approaching at 01 mark 03!' shouted Tram over the collision siren. She stabbed at the shield controls, the panic on her face growing exponentially. 'I can't get shield power past 56 per cent! The shields won't stop a door mouse at that level!'

Steven dragged himself to the security station, where the technician was frantically trying to divert any remaining power to the deflectors. 'Can you tap the engines directly for power?'

'I only wish!' screamed the technician. 'The power transfer system isn't designed for that type of switch over! We'd cause a terminal overload!'

Cameron was standing directly in front of the viewscreen. Stone-faced, she watched as a shockwave the size of three Empire State Buildings reached out for her ship from the heart of the anomaly.

'We're dead,' she muttered to herself.

'Young man, I am getting too old for this!' The Doctor shoved Maxon aside and grabbed the box. He desperately looked for an access port, but the unit was completely integrated, and he didn't have time to bash it open.

'The shockwave is a temporal event... time winds... super-lucid particles... must get a transmission organized... I have...' he glanced at his pocket watch, 'ninety seconds. Plenty of time.' The Doctor threw down the box, and pulled out one of the attached cables, which he plugged into the back of his pocket watch. He then flipped open the analogue clock face, revealing a holographic computer screen, crawling

with alien text that looked like a cross between ancient Greek and mathematical formula. The Doctor gently tapped out a sequence on the holo-screen, just as the edges of the shockwave began to rattle the hull.

'I rarely work well under such time pressures,' he muttered, as he tapped out a final sequence, 'but I will acquiesce this one time!'

The watch gave a high pitch shriek.

Tram read out the death knell from the security monitor. 'The shockwave will reach us in ten seconds... nine...'

No one said a word as they stood and watched the energy wave approach. Every piece of the hull was screaming in pain.

'... six... five... four...'

As the wave closed in to ten kilometres, a roar of hull stress filled the ship. Cameron closed her eyes. Steven grabbed onto a console, wondering if he would–

The wave vanished.

'... two... one! ALRIGHT! I'm never doing another countdown on this ship again!' Tram didn't know whether to laugh or scream. 'Why are we still alive?'

Cameron opened one eye, then the other. On the viewscreen, there was nothing but the familiar conflagration of the anomaly, and black empty space.

'Shut off the alarms.' The lighting returned to normal and the siren cut out, replaced by the relayed voices of damage control teams throughout the ship. Gently, as if not quite believing she was still here, Cameron made her way to the science station.

'It seems that a transmission sent to the anomaly ordered it to re-absorb the wave. I have no idea how anyone could do that, and I don't have a clue how to read the data that was sent. But, we are alive, so I'm not going to complain.'

Steven transferred a copy of the data stream to the security monitor. When the information was displayed, his eyes widened in recognition. He didn't understand the script, but he had seen it being written out often enough by a familiar hand.

'Do you know what it says?' asked the Technician.

'Me? Nope. Not a clue,' said Steven, a little too quickly.

'Dear oh dear, that was exhausting.'

Breathing heavily ('quite embarrassing'), collar undone ('quite inappropriate'), the Doctor sat against the wall, looking very crumpled. He dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief and tried not to hyperventilate.

He looked across the room at Maxon: he was sulking, his back to the Doctor. He was cradling the black box in his arms, muttering incoherently to himself. He wasn't a happy camper.

The Doctor crawled over to where he sat, and tried to put a hand on his shoulder. But he shook it off violently, and clutched the box even more tightly.

'I am truly sorry, but what you did could have cost the lives of hundreds of innocent people. The problem is, I think you knew that. So why proceed with such madness? What are you here for?'

Maxon began whispering to himself, but it was clear he had heard everything the Doctor said. Over and over he whispered something. It was unintelligible to the Doctor's ears, and after a while, the Doctor simply sighed and rose to his feet with the help of one of the cables.

'It seems I shall have to proceed with my original plan.' Gathering himself together, the Doctor prepared to leave the computer core... until he was violently thrown against the wall by Maxon. His eyes wild with some hitherto unseen fervour, he stared at the Doctor with a strange combination of fear, anger, and anticipation.

The Doctor smiled weakly. 'I get the impression that you want me to stay, good sir.'

Maxon seemed confused. He shook his head back and forth, as if unsure what to do next. Then, as if a thick fog had lifted from him, Maxon's eyes were suddenly, terribly clear. He gazed into the depths of the Doctor's soul... and there was verse:

The Universe, did Rassilon smite, Space and time was breached. Forever ripped, the void of night, The monsters were unleashed...

Every hair on the Doctor's body stood on end. His horror was so palpable even Maxon was taken aback.

'How do you know that poem?' He could barely utter a breath. 'Who are you?'

Maxon tapped his nose, then the Doctor's.

'Monsters. Monsters in the darkness. They're waiting.'

'Look at the power curve! It's brilliant! This could be the greatest scientific achievement since warp drive!'

Dr. Sammo, fresh from his grounding, had returned to the Bridge in triumph. As the damage control teams scoured the ship, he spent hours at the science station, analysing readings, calibrating sensors, and sucking up data so fast that the sensor arrays were overheating. Now he was waving pads, charts, and disks in front of everybody's faces – especially Tram's –trying to make his point.

'I suspect the energy potential measured in the shockwave was only the tip of the iceberg. This anomaly could become a power plant unlike anything in the universe. Imagine the Earth Empire, run with an inexhaustible energy supply! Prospects are staggering!'

'This is ridiculous!' Tram was at her breaking point. 'Not only do we not know how to control anything about the anomaly, we don't even understand the equations that were transmitted to initiate and terminate the shockwave!' She held her hands out pleadingly. 'Haven't we had enough near-death experiences on this ship to convince us that we're playing with fire?'

'She's right.' Steven stood beside Tram, incredulity written all over his face. 'Don't you people realize what a close call we had! This thing is beyond dangerous! And if you want to continue with this suicide mission, then show me to the nearest shuttle, because I want to get off... now!'

Sammo shook his head. 'You don't understand! None of you do... except for you, Sarah.' Sammo walked over to where Dr. Cameron was sitting, staring at the churning space on the viewscreen. 'You know we have to continue, Sarah. That's why you were chosen as team leader. You get results... and you'll get them here.'

Everyone on the Bridge seemed to hold their breaths, waiting for a reply. For a while, it seemed as if Cameron was content to stare at the viewscreen all day. And then:

'We proceed as planned. Sammo, you have three hours to get that anomaly open.'

'Thank you, Sarah.' Unable to contain his pleasure, Sammo returned to the science station, grinning like an idiot, and barking orders to junior crewmembers. Tram stormed off the Bridge, scattering pads and equipment in her wake. Forgotten by the others, Steven alone looked at Cameron, praying that she knew what she was doing. Sensing his eyes on her, she turned to look at him, and cracked a small, sad smile for his benefit.

'I hope so too, Steven. I hope so too.'

The Doctor had slumped back against the wall, but it had nothing to do with exhaustion.

I thought I had escaped them. I thought I had left behind everything that they represent... everything I used to be. Why this happening?

Maxon was sitting in front of him, having calmed down considerably. He was looking at him like a lost puppy, eager for a new master.

'You were sent to seal the breach, weren't you. They already knew it was unstable, and they sent you to fix it. But something went wrong, didn't it. Catastrophically wrong.'

Arthritic limbs complaining, he reached over for the black box and its motley collection of wires. Turning it over and over in his hands, the Doctor set it back down on the ground, his fear finally confirmed.

'This is cannibalised equipment from your TARDIS. Do you remember? TARDIS.'

Maxon seemed to perk up slightly. TARDIS!

T... A... R... D... I... S... S No.... only one S.'

The Doctor's mind was racing, trying to piece together events from long ago. 'You took your ship into the heart of the breach... probably tried to link it to your dematerialization circuit. But something went wrong. “They” probably misjudged the instability of the breach. You weren't properly prepared for it.'

The Doctor dragged himself to his feet and began to pace, tapping his index finger on his lips in time to his steps. 'It spat you out, but the gravity well pulled you back. You attempted a temporal shift... but the pull was more than gravity. You were flung into the future.' He looked

down at Maxon, who looked back up at him expectantly. 'You must have travelled a long way. How long, I wonder...'

Maxon giggled, and broke into another verse: 'Bowships, Blackstars, weapons all Before them did the enemies fall The Breaches sealed, by his command Total vict'ry, did he demand.'

The Doctor felt a hollowness form inside of him. 'Ten million years? So long... and so alone.' He looked at Maxon, gibbering to himself as he played with the black box. 'No wonder your mind is in such a state. You must have an enormous artron reserve. It's probably the reason They sent you on this mission.'

Maxon wasn't paying attention, having discovered, to his delight, that he was able to reverse the Doctor's modifications. Knees creaking louder than he liked, the Doctor slowly lowered himself to Maxon's eye level.

'No one deserves to suffer the way you suffered, my friend. Not for one moment. But if you can't tell me what your plan was to seal the breach, I shall have to come up with something on my own.'

He waited for a sign, a word. Anything. But Maxon's attention continued to be fixated on the black box. The Doctor's head drooped sadly. 'So very useless.' He prepared himself for the arduous task of rising to his feet...

...and Maxon was on top of him like a cat. His eyes full of arctic cold, he carefully reached out to touch the Doctor's temples.

The Doctor shrank back, eyes wide with trepidation. 'No!' he breathed. 'Don't ask me to do this! You have no idea what I have to lose if They find me!'

Maxon paused in his advance, his face a block of granite. 'Needtoknowneedtoknown.' He spoke in an unfeeling monotone, but a single tear running down his cheek spoke louder than any words he might have cobbled together. The Doctor watched the tear roll down Maxon's face, wondering about the depth of his countryman's sacrifice over the course of aeons. Would he have the same fortitude if he found himself in the same situation?

There was only one way to find out.

The Doctor closed his eyes and took a deep, rattling breath.

'Very well. There is no other way.'

Maxon moved forward once more, placing both his index fingers on either temple. Slowly, as if following a set of dusty, unused instructions, the Doctor's hands found their way to Maxon's temples, fingers placed identically on each temple. The only difference was that the Doctor's old hands were shaking considerably.

They both sat there, unmoving and silent. After a moment, they spoke a single word in quiet unison.

'Contact.'

And then, there was understanding.

'I suggest we program the following trajectory.'

'Are you sure the probe can handle the sheering stress involved with such a route?'

'Don't worry, Sarah. I know I can break through the anomaly, even without the help of magical equations transmitted from the ether.'

Cameron and Sammo were hunched over the holocron, which was currently displaying an image of the anomaly covered with dozens of possible co-ordinate plot lines. Beyond them, the rest of the science team was busy at their stations, calibrating all remaining data to assist in the final push into the unknown.

Between the chattering scientists and the harassed damage control teams, Steven felt it was wise to blend into the background. He hovered near Tram's station, which was positively inactive compared to all the other areas of the Bridge. Tram mirrored this inactivity, slouched in her chair and glaring at her single, functional screen.

'I can't believe we're going ahead with this.'

Steven shrugged. 'For a group of people who want to rush into danger, they seem pretty confident.'

'Arrogant is more like it.' Tram reached out and transferred her controls to shipboard diagnostics, causing Steven to raise an eyebrow.

'You in the dog house?'

'You could say that.' Tram turned a dagger-hurling gaze at Sammo's back. 'The overly-proportioned Dr. Sammo has, in his wisdom, convinced the putty-centred Dr. Cameron that it would be best, at this critical stage of the project, for the intern to observe the experts at work.'

'Isn't that a polite way of saying “push off”?'

Tram cracked a smile. 'That's the translation I got as well.'

'Look on the bright side. If they do screw up, you can be the first one to say “I told you so”.'

'That could be worth it... if they don't blow us up first.' A signal from the diagnostic monitor dragged Tram's attention back to her station. 'That's interesting.'

'Something wrong?'

'Actually, it might be good news for you, Steven. According to the security monitors, a deck hatch has opened, and an alien life form is being tracked.'

Steven's heart jumped. 'The Doctor! He managed to get out!'

'Unfortunately, there aren't any security guards to spare for me to send and fetch him. They've all been assigned to the damage control teams.'

Steven smiled. 'I'm not completely surplus to requirements. Give me directions, and I'll go fetch him myself.'

Tram quickly powered up another monitor and ordered up a ship schematic. 'Your wish is my command.'

His face frighteningly impassive, the Doctor slowly approached the TARDIS. As he reached out with the key, he could feel the tone of his ship change, as it sensed its master approach. The warm, soothing vibrations deepened, becoming colder... darker.

The Doctor placed his worn, wrinkled hand against the faded, chipped paint of the police box door. 'I know, my dear old thing. I know. I've never asked anything of you like this. Not since we first began our journeys, so long ago. But I need you now, my faithful ship. More than ever... I need you.'

The Doctor gently slotted the key into the lock, trying to cause the minimum discomfort. Almost immediately the darkness relented, leaving only worry... and support. The Doctor smiled, patted the side of the TARDIS, and opened the door.

'Doctor! Wait!'

Steven barrelled down the corridor, having run all the way from the Bridge. When the Doctor heard his cry, he almost dropped the TARDIS

key. He turned to his on-rushing companion, almost succeeding in hiding his shocked expression.

'Ah, there you are at last, my boy.' The Doctor cleared his throat theatrically. 'I knew that you, um... well... you were capable of taking care of yourself. You haven't been causing any mischief, I hope? I'm, uh... just... popping in to, um... check if there is any remaining... um... remaining... damage! Yes, that's it!'

Steven, doubled over and trying to get air into his lungs, managed to aim a puzzled glance at the old man. 'Are you ok?'

'Of course I'm... as you so unimaginatively put it... ok. Why shouldn't I be?'

'Well, aside from falling down a trap door, and suffering through the near destruction of this ship, I thought it might be a good question. Who knows what's going to happen when they take this thing into the anomaly, and–'

'What did you say?' The Doctor's face was suddenly as white as his hair. 'Did you say this ship is going to try and breach the anomaly?'

'That's right.' Steven was suddenly feeling as if he was knee deep in quicksand. 'Within the hour, if what I've seen is anything to go by.'

The Doctor turned away, and for a moment, he seemed to stare into nothingness, his eyes darting back and forth, his fingers steepled against his lips. He might have been muttering something, but Steven wasn't sure.

'Doctor? Is something wrong?'

'Wrong? Wrong?' The old man smiled at him, which sent a chill down his spine, and pushed the metaphorical quicksand to his neck. 'Everything is fine, my boy. I think it's an excellent idea. They might even discover how to stop the temporal threat posed by the anomaly... and I think you should help them.'

Steven felt his jaw hit the floor. 'Me?'

'Of course, dear boy. I would wager that there isn't a pilot aboard who has the experience you do of flying through spatial turbulence. I've even shown you how to do it with the TARDIS.'

'That's true, but...' Steven wasn't sure what to say, '...but why can't you come up and offer them your help?'

The Doctor cleared his throat once more. 'I would, but I really do

need... I mean... I really should check the TARDIS. You know how stubborn and impertinent my old ship can be. If even the smallest component is out of alignment, she'll be wheezing at us for weeks. No, no, no... you run back to your friends and offer them your services. I'm sure they'll be most grateful.'

Steven's head was spinning with questions, not the least of them being “What the hell is he up to?” 'You aren't trying to get me out of the way for some reason, are you?'

'Trying to get you out of the way? Really, Steven, your overactive imagination never ceases to amaze me! And since when have you questioned my judgement, hmm?' The Doctor grasped his suspenders and stared imperiously into Steven's eyes. Knowing the expression of old, Steven sighed and did what he always did under the circumstances.

'Fine. I'll go. I'll offer to fly them in. I'll keep the ship together. Will that satisfy you, Doctor?'

'Indeed it will, my boy.'

'Then I'll see you later.' Steven turned and headed back the way he came, but not before adding: 'By the way... I'm glad you're all right.'

'I appreciate the sentiment. Now, run along!'

With a final suspicious glance over his shoulder, Steven proceeded back to the Bridge. The Doctor watched with baited breath until Steven was away, and slowly blew his anxiety out through his teeth. Looking furtively down either end of the corridor, he reached around the side of the TARDIS and gently pulled a tightly huddled Maxon out of hiding.

'Not much further, my friend. Just a step over the threshold...' The Doctor stopped when Maxon went stiff. He turned to see his addled companion frozen in place, staring up at the light on top of the police box, then into the blackness of the doorway.

'She's singing to me,' he said, voice full of past memories.

'I'm glad you can still hear it.'

Maxon shivered. 'She's afraid of giving up a piece of herself.'

'I know. We shall have to sooth her concerns. Together.'

Still resisting, but only slightly, Maxon allowed himself to be guided over the TARDIS threshold. Behind them, the doors smoothly, and silently, closed of their own accord.

'Are you sure you understand the controls?'

Cameron stood over Steven's shoulder as he settled into the main helm console. She watched as his fingers flew over the touch sensitive controls, bringing up navigation protocols and diagnostic procedures.

'Nothing to it. She seems like a very smooth ship.'

'Well, I appreciate your efforts, of course,' said Cameron, 'I'm just wondering why volunteer now? You seem more inclined to side with Tram about the idiocy of our mission.'

Steven smiled, taking a firm grip on the steering control. 'It's quite simple, Sarah. I'm still not convinced about the wisdom of this trip into the anomaly... but since I am a passenger, I might as well help ensure our survival. Besides, I'm a better pilot than anyone else on board. You couldn't be in safer hands.'

Cameron placed a comforting hand on Steven's shoulder. 'Thank god,' she whispered to him. 'I was beginning to think that Sammo was going to try and fly the ship in himself.'

'Just let him try and get near me,' Steven smiled.

Cameron patted him on the shoulder and walked back to the master situation monitor, where Sammo was making final preparations. 'Any minute now, and we can launch the probe.'

'You're convinced it will work?'

'Of course it will. We shall follow directly behind the probe and push our way in like an old fashioned syringe. Nothing will go wrong. I await only your go-ahead signal.'

'You have it. All stations, prepare for departure. Shields to maximum.' Cameron took her seat behind the central console, as the assembled Bridge crew leapt for their mission stations. As Sammo began tapping in his probe instructions, Cameron fastened her safety harness. 'Steven, take us to our entry coordinates.'

Steven's hands danced over the controls. 'Coming about.'

The air in the computer core was like ice. But it had nothing to do with the temperature.

The Doctor, his hands shaking ever so slightly, slowly opened a small, teak box. He reached inside and pulled out a crystal the size of a

silver dollar. Perfectly round, the crystal shone with the colours of the time vortex; shades and tints that nature had no hope of reproducing in the real world. Strobes of the unearthly light danced across the faces of the Doctor and Maxon as the crystal was passed from one unsteady hand to another.

'I was always taught that you were never supposed to touch a Tachoid Time Crystal,' breathed the Doctor as he passed on the jewel. 'Never did I envision a time when I would be forced to carve a section out of the crystal in my own ship.'

Maxon gently took the crystal, gazing deep into its heart. 'Prettyprettything.' Then, as if another personality had suddenly assumed control, Maxon walked with jerking steps over to the black box, which was now attached to a new configuration of leads and cables. He gently placed the crystal on top of the box, then tapped its surface three times.

The crystal strobed once... twice... then disappeared into the box, sliding through the casing as if it were melted chocolate. A faint throbbing sound began to whisper from the box. Above them, the energy wash of the core flared a deep, angry red.

'Any moment now,' muttered the Doctor. He glanced at his pocket watch and crossed his fingers.

'Probe launched,' shouted Sammo.

'Thrusters ahead full,' announced Steven, pushing the ship forward.

Cameron stared at the main viewscreen. The small, pretzel-shaped probe shot forward into the turbulent mass of the anomaly, the ship following close behind. For a brief moment, she wondered what it would feel like to collide with an energy field.

'Probe has activated entry cycle.' With a final flash of beacon light, the probe disappeared into the churning maw. The ship continued to press forward.

'Five hundred kilometres,' shouted Steven.

'Nothing's happening,' whispered Tram, watching from her station. 'It's not opening.'

'It will open,' muttered Sammo. 'It must open.'

'Two hundred kilometres,' shouted Steven.

In the computer core, Maxon placed a hand on top of the black box, and closed his eyes.

In the back of his mind, the Doctor heard singing.

'Do something!' screamed Tram. 'We're going to crash!'

'Five kilometres,' pronounced Steven.

Cameron turned to look at Sammo, her face a giant question. But Sammo wasn't paying attention. He was transfixed by the screen, a huge smile across his face. Cameron turned to Steven. 'Stand by to abor...'

The anomaly opened wide. One moment, there was an imposing energy vortex, the next moment... nothing. Under Steven's iron hand, the ship followed a perfectly straight line into the void, without even a hint of stress.

Everyone on the Bridge stared at the viewscreen, which showed nothing but a pulsing black and blue tunnel of... something. Sensors all over the ship gave up trying to analyse the outside world, and shut down before they blew their AI's. No one paid any attention.

'We're coming up on the threshold,' announced Steven, reading off the navigation computer. 'We will cross it in three... two... one...'

The ship exited the anomaly.

The Doctor shook Maxon by the shoulders. 'I can't let you do this. You have no need to sacrifice yourself. There must be another solution!'

Maxon was sitting cross-legged on the floor, the reconfigured black box in his arms. He rocked back and forth, in time to the singing of the box. 'Nonono... have to be sure... one hundred percent.' He was millions of years old, but he looked at the Doctor with the eyes of a four year old. 'Friend has to go... no doubt about it... friend has to go. Friend has other friend to save.'

'Steven. Yes, of course.' The Doctor turned to leave – he knew time was limited. But as he crossed the threshold of the computer core, he turned for one last look at Maxon. He was in his own world, his mission having consumed any remaining hints of reason.

The Doctor shot down the conduit as fast as his ancient limbs could carry him. As he threaded through the bowels of the ship, he wondered

if he was running for the TARDIS... or running from the carnage that was soon to come.

'What the hell is going on?'

The oxygen pumps were silent. Monitor stations all over the bridge deactivated. Sensors, transmitters, the comm system. Everything shut down. Even the lights dimmed out. The Bridge was a silent, frightening place, plunged into pitch-blackness...

...except for the fact that, outside the ship, space was a bright, electric blue.

'What is this place?' All the blood had drained from Cameron's face, leaving her black-lit complexion even more disturbing.

Everyone on the Bridge stood still, as if moving would only draw even more attention to the silence. Even Sammo seemed transfixed, although Steven quickly realized that it was for a completely different reason.

'An entirely new dimension. A completely different space, at odds with everything in our universe. Magnificent,' he whispered, pressing his face against the largest portal he could find. 'Absolutely unprecedented!'

'Steven, can you hear me?' Tram's voice was barely audible over the comm link, but in the fathoms-deep silence of wherever they were, it came through loud and clear.

'What's up?'

'I still have one basic visual sensor working at my station. Check your navigational panel.'

Steven turned to his eyes to the panel in front of him, and was rewarded with an image of the anomaly, which was slowly beginning to churn once more. Steven knew exactly what Tram was thinking even before she spoke again.

'It's closing Steven! If we don't leave now, we probably never will!'

'We're not leaving on this tub.' Steven thumped the helm, but it remained unresponsive. 'There isn't enough power on this boat to light a match. What's the total crew compliment?'

'One hundred and nine.'

'Any shuttles?'

'Just escape pods... and only enough to hold twenty people.'

'What is this? The Titanic?'

Tram snorted. 'Nope. Just an under funded, under-equipped mission from Earth Central. The creme de la crème of Imperial policy.'

'If that's it, then I don't know how we're...' Steven suddenly smacked his forehead. 'I'm an idiot! The TARDIS! We could all leave on my ship!'

Steven slipped out of the helm and rushed to Tram's station. 'Got a torch?'

Tram dug in the locker under her chair and pulled one out. 'Are you sure there'll be enough room on your ship for everyone?'

'You have no idea. I'll be back in a few minutes. Get everyone ready to leave.' Steven grabbed the torch and headed off the Bridge. Tram stood and turned to her fellow crewmembers... only to find them all plastered against every porthole they could find, rapture on their faces.

'This might get ugly.'

Steven retraced his path back to the TARDIS by instinct, and was rewarded with the welcoming sight of the police box doors wide open. He stepped inside, blinking at the sudden transition between black light and brilliant white, and found the Doctor standing at the console, staring off into space.

'Doctor! The anomaly is closing.' As the console room doors closed behind him, Steven tried to shove aside his lack of breath. 'We need to get out of here!'

Without a word, the old man turned and transfixed him with a stare that could freeze a supernova. Steven stood rooted to the spot, trepidation flowing through him like water. It seemed to last for an eternity before he was released.

'Didn't you hear me, Doctor? We have to leave!'

'I know,' whispered the Doctor.

He reached out to the console and slammed home the dematerialization control.

'I am NOT leaving!'

Sammo was screaming over the silence, his self-control, and his tolerance of Tram, exploding out of control.

'Then as far as I'm concerned, you can stay here and rot, you perfidious egotist! I'm taking Steven's offer and leaving, before I'm stuck here forever!'

'Maybe you've miscalculated,' begged Cameron. 'You're only relying on one basic visual sensor.'

Tram turned on her, eyes wild with disbelief. 'Why are you always trying to conciliate between us? You never take sides! What are you afraid of?'

'Afraid?' Cameron stared daggers at Tram. 'AFRAID?!' Tram took an involuntary step back. She had never heard Cameron raise her voice to anyone. 'I'm afraid to admit that my science team is a motley collection of argumentative preschoolers, unable to function without their mommy! And I am sick and tired of being mommy!'

'You have no idea how happy I am to see you finally putting this puppy in her place, Sarah.' Sammo was beaming with pleasure... until Cameron turned her volcanic gaze onto him.

'You shouldn't talk, you arrogant bastard!'

Sammo spluttered uncontrollably. 'How dare you!'

'Dr. Cameron! The anomaly!'

The security tech's cry made everyone look at the viewscreen. The anomaly was churning once more, tinged by the electric blue of the space outside. It stretched, collapsed... and like a bad dream, disappeared without a sound.

'No! It's not possible...' Sammo's glasses slid off his nose. It was doubtful he heard them fall to the floor.

'What do we do now?' Tram's voice was small and quiet, something of a new experience.

'We figure a way out.' Sammo pushed his way through the crowd of dumbstruck crewmen to the science station, thumping on its dead console in a futile attempt to get it working. 'We simply have to study what was left–' He stopped, eyes widening. 'What's that sound?'

'Sound?' snapped Tram, a little bite returning to her voice. 'There hasn't been any sound since we entered this... She suddenly went quiet. 'Wait a minute. I can hear something.'

'So can I,' whispered Cameron, straining.

She didn't have to try so hard. It built very quickly... a low moan, carried on an imaginary wind. The louder it grew, the more it twisted, becoming strident... piercing...

It became a scream.

'What is it?' shouted Sammo. 'What the hell is it?!'

Cameron screwed her eyes shut, trying to stop the scream from penetrating further into her mind. She opened them momentarily, to avoid tripping over a chair, and spied the viewscreen.

She screamed.

Everyone turned to the viewscreen. They screamed.

They might have been shadows. Or demons.

Whatever they were, they were massive, and they could have picked the ship up with one claw. There might have been two of them, or there could have been a thousand. They swooped down, through the black-lit ether, flashes of nothingness. Their siren cries travelled unstoppably through the void, giving lie to the notion that, in space, no one could hear a scream.

One hundred and nine people aboard an unmarked Imperial Earth science vessel heard their screams, and added their own to the mix as the demons surrounded the vessel like a blanket. A piercing cry, higher pitched than the screaming, howled through the blue void. It might have been a shout of ecstasy.

It was more likely a rumble of hunger...

The screaming penetrated even the computer core, but it was a joyous symphony to Maxon's ears. He smiled as darkness seeped into the core like black oil, but he gave it know mind. He held his black box close to his chest, its work finally complete.

'Alldonealldonealldone. Can rest now... finally sleep. Snooze and snore and... and...'

He never finished. The darkness claimed the room, and one by one, everything was extinguished. The light from the cable connections, the energy wash in the ceiling... and the erratic pulse of a double heartbeat.

The mission was complete.

The time rotor rose and fell with calm equanimity. A far cry from Steven's current state of mind.

'The anomaly?' he asked, spitting out the question.

'Sealed.' The Doctor kept his back to Steven, making it easier for him to remain expressionless.

'The ship? The crew?'

The Doctor closed his eyes, listening to imaginary screams. 'Dead.'

Steven laughed a bitter, ugly laugh. 'That's all you can say? You can stand there and calmly tell me they're dead, and not feel anything!'

'That is not true!'

'Of course it's true!' barked Steven, grabbing the Doctor and forcibly turning him around. 'You deliberately took off before we... before I... could save any of those people! Why?!'

'If the TARDIS remained, the anomaly could not be sealed! The presence of two tachoid crystals would lead to a–'

'I don't believe you! You condemned over a hundred people to death, and you're justifying it with technobabble!'

'You go too far, Steven!'

'Do I? Then tell me why? Answer me that simple question! Why?'

'Why?' The Doctor drew himself up, his chest heaving. Steven stepped back, suddenly afraid.

'Do you want to know why all of this happened? Because long ago, one of my own people made a terrible mistake! In his arrogance, he defied science, nature, and common sense. He punched holes in the universe, and unleashed terrors so hideous; we paid for his mistake with a war that cost trillions of lives across thousands of worlds! By the time the breaches were sealed, my race sat knee-deep in the blood of innocents. Now I sit in the very same blood! The lives of a hundred innocents, sacrificed to protect billions! A choice had to be made... and may I be damned forever for making it! So do not presume to lecture me on morality, Mr. Taylor, lest you one day be forced to make the same decision!'

The Doctor stalked out of the console room, violently knocking over the chairs and objet d'art in his way. Steven stood where he was, rooted to the spot by thoughts and emotions he was unaccustomed to feeling. He wanted to run after the Doctor, to explain to him that he did

understand... that the choice he made was something no one should ever face.

But then he remembered the faces of Tram, Sarah Cameron, even Dr. Sammo... and one ugly thought lodged in his mind.

The Doctor was getting off easy.

A Tale of Monsters

DAVID BICKLEY

The Doctor had lost his way.

Currently in his sixth incarnation, the Doctor was walking through a dense wood, following an uncertain path, choosing his route as the whim took him. He was in a foul mood.

Recent events had shaken him. He had been accused by those whose opinions mattered of being a violent blunderer, capable only of pompous bluster. He was an oaf, a braggart. He had none of the qualities of his former selves, which had once made him great. So he had been told. Several times.

After a few days of aimless, miserable wanderings in the void, he had resolved that, as soon as the TARDIS landed somewhere vaguely safe with a breathable atmosphere, he would go for a brisk walk, wherever the location, and do his best to clear his mind. In response to his command, the TARDIS had, in a stab of random nostalgia, deposited him somewhere in the Home Counties of England.

He sniffed at the woodland air dismissively. He had a horrible feeling he was somewhere near Guildford. Nevertheless, he had decided to persevere and had plunged into the depths of the wood.

And so it was that he had lost his way.

The small creature had been running the other way down the path, not looking where it was going. It collided with the Doctor, sucking the breath out of him and nearly knocking him over.

It was a human child and one that had evidently been crying recently: tears were glistening on its cheeks and snot starting to congeal under its nose. It was, quite frankly, the least cute infant the Doctor had ever seen in all his wanderings through time and space.

'Careful!' the Doctor remonstrated. He studied the child. On balance it was probably female, he decided, possibly seven or eight years old. He noticed that she was carrying a painting, or rather a collage, gaudily decorated with brightly-coloured tissue paper. It had the worrying look

of a school project about it.

He realised the child was studying him with as much intensity as he was studying her. 'I like your coat,' she decided eventually.

He blinked. 'Since I became who I am now,' he declared portentously, 'I have travelled the universe, visiting countless worlds and passing the time of day with innumerable sentient beings, all with widely different tastes. And in all that time, you young lady, are the only one to have said that you like my coat.' He frowned. 'Do you really?'

'Oh yes!' she enthused. 'It's funny!'

The Doctor felt rather chuffed. He reached into a pocket of the jacket and retrieved a bag of sweets. 'Have a jelly-baby, why don't you?'

The girl stared at the bag. 'I don't like jelly-babies.'

The Doctor's spirits sank. 'Oh,' he said quietly, returning the bag back to the depths of his pocket. 'Why not?'

She shrugged. 'I just don't.'

He smiled wistfully, without a trace of humour. 'I can't help but feel that if I had offered you those sweets two lifetimes ago, you would have accepted them without hesitation.'

The child looked up at him in honest puzzlement. 'I don't understand.'

He wrinkled his forehead in thought. 'Let me explain. Have you ever found yourself repeating a conversation you had with a friend? When you had that conversation the first time around, everything went perfectly - they laughed when they were supposed to; they frowned when they were supposed to; they enjoyed listening to you. The second time, though, everything you say is wrong. You irritate them, even though you're doing exactly the same as you were before. And you can't work out why it isn't working the second time round.' He stared at her. 'Do you know what I mean?'

She stared back, a little bemused. 'Yes,' she said, eventually. 'My parents used to listen to me but, since my brother was born, they don't care any more. They just tell me to shut up or go to my room. But they listen to him all the time - and he can't even talk. He just sits there and screams.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes, you do know what I mean. That's how I feel these days. I do everything I used to do, in pretty much the same

way, but it never seems to go as I planned. People say that I'm arrogant, but I've always been that - you should have seen how I was at the start. People say that I'm violent but you should have seen what I was like in my third life. They never give me the benefit of the doubt.'

'Who are these people you're talking about?'

'Never mind, never mind.' He frowned, a sudden thought derailing his melancholy. 'Incidentally, I'm sure, whatever their faults, your parents advised you not to speak to a stranger like me.'

She shrugged and said nothing.

'What's your name?'

'Isobel.'

The Doctor decided to try a new conversational gambit. 'What is it that you have there?' he asked, pointing to the painting the girl was clutching.

She sniffed and looked downcast. 'Something I did for school. My teacher didn't like it. It got three out of ten. It's the Solar System.'

'May I have a look?'

Isobel passed him the collage wordlessly. It was a riot of black tissue paper, studded with the occasional blob of tissue paper of other hues - yellow, red, blue and green - which presumably represented the Sun and the planets. It was, to be brutal, a mess. The Doctor was rather surprised it had won as many as three points.

'It's very impressive,' he lied.

'My teacher didn't like it,' she said sullenly.

The Doctor resumed his examination of the picture. He was sure there was something wrong with it but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Eventually - and with an acute sense of embarrassment at having taken so long to get there - he realised what the problem was.

'You've got the Sun orbiting the Earth, Isobel. I think that's why your teacher didn't mark it very highly.'

'But it does go round the Earth!' Isobel insisted. 'Anyone can see that. It's obvious.'

The Doctor opened his mouth to argue and then closed it again. 'You just keep an open mind on that front, IsobeL As long as you don't think the world's flat...'

She looked up at him as if he were simple. 'Of course it's not flat,' she said solemnly. 'It's *curved*. Anyone can see that. It's obvious.'

The Doctor coughed. He sensed he was losing this conversation on points. 'Yes, well, be that as it may.' He resumed his study of the collage. 'I do like your picture though, Isobel. Mind you, I think you may have lost marks on the labelling of planets.' He passed the collage back to her. I'm sure Earth isn't spelled with a 'U', you know.'

She eyed him suspiciously. 'How is it spelled then?'

'It starts with an 'E' and an 'A', usually. At least it does in English.'

'But that's wrong! That sounds wrong. It must be spelled with a 'U'. Anyone can see that. It's obvious.'

The Doctor shrugged mentally and decided to abandon his quest to educate the young, contenting himself merely with observing, 'I fear that you and the English language are not destined to have a happy relationship, Isobel.'

He glanced again at the collage in her hands, then saw her face red with crying and tried to be enthusiastic. 'I liked the little circle shapes you'd painted in the middle of deep space. What were they?'

'They're alien spaceships!' Isobel told him with grim relish.

'Ah,' said the Doctor, unable to stop himself. 'Most alien spaceships aren't actually saucer-shaped, you know.'

'I know that,' the girl said, a little irritably. 'They're usually huge and big and metal and have huge great fires at one end and a great wall of glass or plastic or something at the front so that the aliens can see where they're going and lots of little ships coming out of that great big one so that all the aliens can go up and down from the big ship. Anyone can see that. It's obvious.'

The Doctor stared at her, dazed. 'Yes,' he said slowly. 'That's right... That's exactly what most mother ships in an invading alien taskforce look like... Isobel, what do you mean *'Anyone can see that. It's obvious'*?'

'I've seen one,' said Isobel, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

'When?'

'Oh, just now, just after I'd got back home from school. It stopped in

the air above the house and all these monsters came down and took my family prisoner. I ran away into this wood. That was why I was running when I met you. And then I met you. That's why I'm here.'

Again all the Doctor could do was stare at her. 'Monsters?' he said weakly.

'Yes!' Isobel insisted. 'They're big! They've got tentacles and huge fly-like eyes! They've got slime dripping from them and everything!'

He stared at her. 'You mean you've kept me talking here all this time with an alien invasion going on all the time we were talking?' She shrugged. 'I worry about your priorities, young lady.'

'I thought you'd be more interested in my painting. I didn't know you'd be interested in the monsters as well, did I?'

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. 'I suppose not. I think you'd better show me the way, Isobel.'

The girl had not been lying. The alien mother ship was indeed huge and big and metal. It glittered with lights, missile launchers and defence systems and its immense size suggested its designer had never been introduced to the concept of budgeting.

From where he and Isobel were standing, at the very edge of the woods, the Doctor gaped up at the ship, which was hovering two hundred feet above them in the skies of Surrey. It dwarfed the farmhouse which lay directly below and which was evidently Isobel's home.

'It's very quiet, isn't it?' Isobel commented cheerfully. 'I expect that's why you didn't notice it was here all the time you were in the woods.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor, a little testily. It was always galling when you failed to notice an alien invasion going on beneath your very nose.

'And have you seen the aliens?' the girl added excitedly.

'Yes, Isobel, I've seen the aliens.'

A dozen or so of the aliens in question could be seen flying between the mother ship and the surface, using rather squat hover-vessels to transport themselves. The Doctor guessed they were doing preliminary reconnaissance work and reporting back to the mother ship before the main invasion began.

The aliens themselves were, without any doubt, the most hideous

the Doctor had ever seen in his travels. They were vast creatures, perhaps twenty feet high, with grey leathery skins. They had innumerable eyes and mouths and their bodies rippled with ghastly green tentacles, which dripped slime from time to time.

'Aren't they're great?' said Isobel enthusiastically.

'I think they might be an acquired taste,' the Doctor replied weakly. He squinted at the aliens and failed entirely to recognise the species. How on Earth - or any other planet for that matter - was he going to deal with this little lot?

'Isobel,' he said. 'You know this area better than I do - do you know of anything near here that could help us rescue your family and get rid of these creatures?'

'I think there's a place with soldiers not far that way,' she replied pointing to behind the farmhouse.

'A place with soldiers? You mean an army base?'

She shrugged. 'I suppose so. And there's a place with planes and everything there too.'

'An airbase too. Interesting.'

'Yes!' Isobel suddenly jumped to her feet excitedly. 'I'm sure if we told them what was going on, *they 'd* do something about it.'

'Maybe,' said the Doctor doubtfully. 'I can't help but suspect, Isobel, that they might already have spotted an alien spaceship hovering in the skies of West Surrey. And furthermore. I can't help but think that the reason why they haven't done anything yet is because they *can 't*.'

Her eyes widened. 'You mean they've all been killed? I saw a film where that happened and this fire came from the sky and all these people were killed and there was blood everywhere and...'

'Not necessarily,' the Doctor interrupted hastily. 'The aliens might simply have put the entire army base into a stasis field, immobilising them without the necessity of killing anyone.'

'Oh,' said Isobel, sounding disappointed.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'I think we'll have to deal with this one on our own. I don't think that the army can help us.'

Maybe not, said a plausible voice from the back of his head, *but they'll have explosives there, won't they? All you have to do is hide an*

explosive device on one of those hover-vessels and wait for it to return to the mother ship. Then you detonate it and that's the end of this invasion. Piece of cake.

'Yes, but what about Isobel's parents and her little brother?' the Doctor said aloud. 'They might be on that ship when blows.'

It'd be for the greater good, the voice insisted. *You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. And so on. Come Doctor, if you don't act now it'll be too late!*

'Maybe,' he said. 'I'm sure there's something else I can do solve this problem other than simply blowing everything up.'

Suit yourself.

Isobel looked up at him suspiciously. 'Who are you talking to? What was that you were saying about my parents?'

'Never mind. Just let me put my mind to the problem for a moment, Isobel, will you?'

He tried applying his mind to the situation at hand but found himself returning to his earlier dark thoughts. He could hear the accusing voices now.

He's readier to resort to force than I would like and he's rather too fond of pompous bluster. Yes, that was how he had been described. And the words still stung.

He straightened up his coat determinedly. 'Well, I'm not going to use force. That's my choice. But let's see what pompous bluster can achieve, shall we?'

He turned to his small companion. 'Stay here, Isobel. whatever happens, don't leave the cover of these trees.'

'But I don't want to!'

'Isoble!'

'Oh all right,' said the girl, nodding in a rather rebellious fashion.

The Doctor left the shelter of the woods and strode resolutely towards the farmhouse, waving his arms to attract the aliens' attention as he did so. At length two of them swooped down in their hover vessels to apprehend him.

'Halt, foolish earthling!' they advised in gurgling unison. 'You are our prisoner.'

'I'm not an earthling!' the Doctor replied indignantly. 'Nor am I your prisoner!'

'But you are foolish?' one of the aliens queried.

The Doctor pretended he hadn't heard. 'Contact your leader. Tell him that an emissary of the planet Gallifrey is here and wishes to speak with him on a matter of extreme urgency. You could even take me to him, if you wanted.'

One of the aliens bubbled something into a microphone on the hover vessel and, after listening to the reply, said, 'No, he will come to you.'

A few moments later another, much larger hover vessel - jewel encrusted no less - appeared on the scene, carrying by far the largest of the aliens that the Doctor had yet seen. With one flick of its mighty tentacles it signalled for the first two aliens to leave him.

'What inferior and primitive being dares summon the elite superior Kazadanax, Conquer of Worlds, to his presence?', the alien roared, towering over the Time Lord, foul breath gusting from its three mouths. 'For I am Kazadanax, Conqueror of Worlds, and I dislike being summoned to the presence of inferior and primitive beings,' it added repetitively.

The Doctor pushed out his chest and straightened his back. 'I an not of this world. I am the Doctor,' he declared, doing his best to invest every word he said with sneering arrogance. 'That should tell you all you need to know.'

The alien looked blank for a moment and then gurgled uncertainly, 'Yes, of course... The Doctor... I know exactly who you are... Yes... Well, why did you want to speak with me, Doctor?'

'First things first,' said the Doctor. 'I have learned that you have taken a number of the natives of this planet prisoner. I wish to learn their location. Are they on board your ship?' He pointed up towards the mother ship.

'Hah!' the alien sneered. 'You think I, Kazadanax, Conqueror of Worlds, would allow such inferior and primitive creatures on ay elite and superior spacecraft where such as they could only pollute its coruscating glory with their inferiority?'

'I suppose not'

'No! We didn't quite have space for them onboard either. We

imprisoned them in that inferior and primitive dwelling place there.' Kazadanax waved two tentacles in the vague direction of the farmhouse.

'You haven't hurt them, have you?' asked the Doctor. 'Because if you have...'

'Hah' said the alien. 'You think I, Kazadanax, Conqueror of Worlds, would allow my superior and elite space troops to waste their glorious supply of ammunition on such primitive and inferior creatures?'

'I'll take that as a 'no'. What about the army base near here? What have you done to them?'

'Hah!' said the alien. 'You think I, Kazadanax...'

'You haven't hurt them?' the Doctor interrupted.

'No,' Kazadanax muttered, a little less grandiloquently than before. 'We used a stasis field to immobilise them temporarily. It's much more cost effective than simply using our weapons. And,' he added, doing his best to recover his stride, 'it would be a dishonour for the superior and elite space troops of the planet Zagadazavacax to use their superior and elite weapons on such inferior and primitive creatures.'

The Doctor looked up at the alien, hands on his hips. 'Then what does bring the superior and elite space troops of the planet Zagada...'

'Zagadazavacax,' said Kazadanax helpfully.

'Thank you. So what does bring the superior and elite space troops of the planet Zagadazavacax to this world then?'

' We are here,' said Kazadanax, 'to conquer the Earth.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor, deflated momentarily. His mind raced to find a way to solve the situation. *Think pompous bluster*, he told himself.

'But this isn't the planet Earth!' he declared with absolute conviction, hoping he was being sufficiently pompous and blustering.

Kazadanax blinked four of his myriad eyes simultaneously. 'Not the planet Earth?' he said doubtfully.

'Definitely not! Does this even look like the planet Earth?'

The alien turned a shade of greeny-grey. 'I don't know. I have never been to the planet Earth. I was not expecting it to look like this, though.'

The Doctor's curiosity was pricked. 'What were you expecting?'

'Something more than green vegetation and inferior and primitive dwelling places. Our source of information told us that the only way to conquer this world successfully was to make a landing in the region of Earth known only as *Southeastengland*. We would fail if we landed anywhere else.'

'Why? What was special about it?'

By judicious waving of his tentacles, Kazadanax succeeded in conveying his embarrassment. 'Our source of information did not tell us that.'

'But surely you must see that this fabled *Southeastengland* must be a vastly civilised and sophisticated place for it to be so important! It couldn't possibly be this place. *Ipso facto* this can't be the planet you were looking for.' The Doctor crossed his fingers behind his back.

'Maybe..'

An idea flickered across the Doctor's mind. 'Let me prove it to you, Kazadanax, old man.' Without glancing back he murmured softly, 'Isobel, pass me your painting, will you?'

'How did you know I was here?' Isobel whispered back from just two feet behind him.

'Long experience, young lady. And the painting?'

She passed it to him and, with a flourish, the Doctor handed it to Kazadanax. 'There, you can see from the etchings of this primitive young native that you're in entirely the wrong solar system altogether.'

Isobel glowed. She had no idea what 'primitive' meant but she was sure it was something complimentary.

Kazadanax was holding the collage up to his eyes, doing his best not to drip green slime onto it. 'I like the circular spaceships,' he commented thoughtfully after pondering it for some while.

'But look at the positioning of the planets!' the Doctor exclaimed with some exasperation. 'Look at how they're spelled! Don't you see that this can't possibly be the right planet?'

Kazadanax squinted at one detail on the painting in particular. 'U-R-T-H,' he spelled out. 'Urth. But that sounds exactly the same as *Earth*.'

'I know - very poor planning. You wouldn't believe the embarrassment it causes.'

Kazadanax blinked fourteen of his seventeen eyes and dripped ectoplasm thoughtfully. 'I should have known there was something wrong,' he gurgled. A tentacle spiralled out of his side, clutching a rather battered-looking book at its end which it placed at the Doctor's feet, where it steamed slightly. 'Take a look at that. That was our source of information. We should never have trusted ourselves to something bought second-hand.'

The Doctor picked the book up gingerly and glanced at its title. Written in Old High Gallifreyan, it was called *10 Great Planets to Conquer as a Base for your Galactic Empire!* What the book's cover didn't divulge was the identity of its author but the Doctor had a few shrewd ideas about that all the same. He skimmed through the book and was rather indignant to note that Earth was deemed only the third best planet to conquer in this sector of the Milky Way.

He handed the book back to Kazadanax who extended a tentacle and absorbed the book back into himself. 'It looks very interesting,' he said encouragingly. 'What were your plans for after your invasion?'

Kazadanax turned mauve, wrapped four of its tentacles around his body and licked three of his lips. The Doctor sincerely hoped that this meant he was shrugging. 'We weren't sure, really. Gazarvax the Mighty wanted to mine deep into the planet Earth to extract its magnetic core. He won't say why. Dazavarkavax the Gruesome wants to transform the planet into a gigantic spaceship to roam the galaxy, plundering all of space. I keep telling him that isn't economically viable and, anyway, we already have a perfectly good fleet of spaceships, as you can see.'

'I think it's a splendid spaceship you've got there,' the Doctor commented cheerfully.

'I agree,' said Kazadanax, turning a bashful shade of fluorescent orange. 'I designed the missile carriers and forward thrusters myself, you know.'

'They're by far the best feature.'

'And Zarxadavax the All-Devouring wants to melt the planet down to its basic elements so that we can use it as fuel for our mighty fleet of time machines so that we can become the lords of time and space.'

'It could work.'

'It could work, but only if we actually had a mighty fleet of time machines. And we don't. And no one has the heart to tell Zarxadavax that. He's got rather tetchy of late.'

'What did you want to do?'

Kazadanax opened two of his mouths, revealing more rows of sharp teeth than was entirely plausible, and retched green slime from them proudly. 'I wanted to destroy the planet Earth's ozone layer, boil away the oceans and convert its puny human inhabitants into mindless slaves, obeying my every whim.'

'Well, that's much more practical,' said the Doctor.

'That's what I say,' said Kazadanax, 'but will they listen?' He gurgled in a depressed fashion for a few seconds and then seemed to recover his spirits somewhat. 'Oh well, I suppose we ought to be going.' He opened all of his eyes wide. 'You're absolutely sure this is Urth and not Earth?'

'Quite sure.'

'Bummer,' said Kazadanax Conqueror of Worlds, drumming four tentacles against the rail of his hover vessel irritably. Then he sighed. 'Anyway, it has been a great pleasure to have met you, Doctor. I hope to meet you again one day. You must pay a visit to the planet Zagadazavacax.'

'As soon as I can spell it,' promised the Doctor expansively. 'But you should be careful in the meantime. It's a long way to Earth. Four hundred light years or so, the last time I looked.'

Kazadanax sighed again. 'That's going to take *forever*,' he said plaintively.

And with that he extended a tentacle to the control panel of his hover-vessel. The craft rose into the sky and disappeared into an airlock of the great mother-ship high above them. Shortly afterwards the great engines of the mighty ship flared violently and the ship lurched its way out of the skies of planet Earth.

The Doctor watched the spacecraft depart almost paternally. 'You know,' he said to Isobel who was now standing next to him open-mouthed, 'if they just developed a little self-confidence and did something about their innate gullibility, they could be quite a successful

race of galactic conquerors.'

Isobel wasn't listening. 'You did it!' she shouted, jumping up and down. 'You made them go away!'

The Doctor preened himself. 'Naturally,' he said, entirely failing to put on a show of modesty.

'And you didn't need to use force!'

'Of course not, young lady. Violence is never the answer to life's problems.'

She looked up at him in admiration. 'No! I can see that now! All you need to do is lie!'

'Erm, Isobel, I'm not sure...'

'But that's what you did! You said this wasn't Earth, and is!' She smiled up at him angelically. 'If ever I find myself trouble, I'm going to lie now, just like you did.'

For the second time that afternoon the Doctor opened mouth to argue with the child and then closed it again. 'Yes, you do that, Isobel. I have a strange feeling you have a long successful life ahead of you.'

Later, when Isobel's family had been found and released from captivity and he had done his best to answer their bewildered questions, the Doctor made his way back towards the TARDIS through the wood.

He had a slight smile on his face. All right - so misleading Kazadanax and his alien hordes was perhaps not going to prove the most significant victory of his career. In fact he suspected that it had been about as hard as shooting fish in a barrel. All the same though, he had done it and - more importantly - in a style that suited him.

He wondered idly for a moment how his former selves would have dealt with the problem. His first incarnation would have devoted all his energies to getting back to the ship and only defeated the invasion as an after-thought. His second incarnation would have spent half his time running away from the aliens. His third incarnation would have probably moralised endlessly in the brief gaps available to him when he wasn't hitting people. His fourth incarnation would have spent a lot of time playing up to some audience he only saw in his head and being tortured from time to time. And as for his fifth incarnation, well, he would be his honest best. He would try really hard. Everyone would die but it

wouldn't be his fault.

The Doctor sniffed. He was being deeply unfair to his own selves of course but he had never been perfect, in any of his lives. He had to remember that. So did his critics. He had always made mistakes and people had always been hurt, just as mistakes had been made and people hurt in his current incarnation.

Today no mistakes had been made. No one had been hurt. There weren't even any scratches on the paint on the farmhouse walls.

It made for a nice change. It probably wouldn't last. But that was all the more reason to enjoy it while it did.

The Doctor found his way back without any trouble.

The Killing of a Flash Boy

JONATHAN W DENNIS

Eddie lit a cigarette with the still burning end of his last one. He flicked the fag end into a puddle, where it hissed as its brief life ended. Old man Keller at the corner shop had dared to lecture Eddie on smoking at such a young age, an unusually brave thing to do to someone sent to collect a debt.

The streets were bare, the vast majority of the village's populace taking advantage of the long weekend to vacation in sunnier climes. There was no one about at all, except for the kid staring at Eddie from his perch on a swing in the park.

The kid could not have been more than nine or ten years old. Everything about him was dark, his eyes, his dirty, uncombed hair, and his stained shirt and trousers. He was probably the son of a poor family, one of those households left with nothing when the factory closed with a father on the dole or on the bottle. The kid's eyes had followed Eddie as he did his rounds, walking shop to shop.

A hundred minor irritations through the day had taken their toll on Eddie's patience, capped by Keller's insolence and the look in this kid's eyes. He crossed the street, taking care to avoid the puddles of slush and melted snow threatening his Italian leather shoes. They had been the first thing he had bought as a symbol of his new status as someone with money and power, someone who wouldn't spend the rest of his life in this backwater.

'What do you think you're staring at, kid?' shouted Eddie.

The boy remained still, his gaze fixed on Eddie. On this side of the street, Eddie could now see the marks around the boy's wrists, bruises and scrapes. It was definitely a father on the bottle, one who liked to come home, smack around the wife a bit, grab the boy by the wrists and give him a good shake. The kid probably set the father off, staring at him like that.

'Clear off, kid. I'm tired of looking at you.'

Still there was no movement, except for a slight pout starting to show on the boy's face. Eddie shook his head. A kid takes a few hits from dear old dad and he thinks he's a tough guy.

Eddie bent down and found a good sized stone, not big enough to do any serious damage like fracture the kid's skull, but big enough to cause some pain. He rolled it in his hand, getting a feel for its weight. His eyes measured the distance, judged the likely trajectory.

'I said "clear off" you little shit,' Eddie yelled and whipped the stone at the boy's head. Years of playground combat paid off as the rock whizzed through the air in a perfect arc towards the boy's head. It sped like a bullet. Even childhood reflexes wouldn't be enough to evade the projectile.

It stopped six inches from the boy's head.

It did not slow down or bounce off some invisible shield. It just stopped and hung in midair, like someone had hit the pause button on the world's remote. The stone hung there for three eternal seconds and dropped to the ground, reclaimed by gravity.

'You're a bad man,' the boy said. His voice was small, but certain and solemn, like a miniature judge.

The core of Eddie's brain, that which had descended through millennia relatively unchanged, housing the survival instincts that had kept this portion of the genetic code alive, told Eddie to run. It screamed it as loud as possible. His pride, though, his self-image, all those conscious thoughts that had only troubled his species in recent times, told him it was ridiculous to run scared from a small boy. What would he tell his friends? How could he intimidate money out of anyone if they saw him in flight from a child half his size?

Eddie dropped to his knees, both of them making a loud crack as they hit the cobblestones. He did not cry out in pain. No more impulses travelled through his nervous system. He pitched face forward onto the street, his head coming to rest in a puddle, the water level neatly bisecting his open right eye.

The boy continued to stare for a few more seconds before running home, leaving Eddie's switched off body in the street, its slowly fading body heat melting the snow. The water ruined his clothes.

Winter had remade the woods in black and white. Barren black tree branches reached for a grey sky from their snowy white base. The only colour present was a recent intrusion. In a small clearing surrounded by leafless skeletons stood the blue police box. It hummed softly to itself, breaking the silence as well as the mood. Two trails of footprints in the snow linked it, however ephemerally, to its occupants.

One of them was bundled in warm black from head to toe, keeping true to the look of the woods. The other was the culprit for the other visual disturbance, his green coat a reminder of warmer seasons.

'So who's this Kate person anyway?' Fitz asked. He wound the scarf once more around his neck as an extra layer of protection against the cold. The Doctor had tried to pawn off some long, multicoloured monstrosity on him, but Fitz had taken one look at it and refused, opting for the simple black model. The other one would have tripped him up continually.

'An old friend of mine,' said the Doctor. He looked up at the sky and smiled, lost for a second in a memory. 'Well, not old precisely, she should still be fairly young around this time period.'

'But what about..?' Fitz's voice trailed off as he stopped and motioned back towards the TARDIS. The Doctor looked puzzled for a second as he followed Fitz's gestures back towards the TARDIS doors. Then the realisation hit and the Doctor waved Fitz's concern off.

'Don't worry. She'll be fine. We've done this before. She'll never even know we were gone this long.'

Fitz followed the Doctor silently through the snow for another few minutes before fmally giving voice to his last concern. It almost went unsaid because he had a feeling he knew the answer.

'So why did we land in the woods?' he asked the Doctor. 'Couldn't you have landed us closer to wherever this Kate person lives.'

The silence lasted a few more paces before the Doctor answered. 'I wanted time to think before we got there. The signal device she used was for emergencies only. There's trouble here.'

Fitz nodded to himself, his suspicions confirmed. He stayed behind the Doctor the rest of the way, trudging through the snow, letting the Time Lord think in silence.

Their host had asked them both to sit but the Doctor refused. He roamed the perimeter of the room, a bundle of nervous energy finding its outlet in rotating the little black cube in his hand. The human wall that had escorted them from the front door stood by the room's only door, motionless, radiating strength and menace.

The Doctor stopped by the window to the left of the desk and turned to face their host. He held the cube up between them.

'This was for Kate's use in case of emergency,' said the Doctor, his voice weighted with indignation. He tossed the cube onto the desk where it bounced a couple of times before fragmenting into a pile of small black squares. 'Where did you get it?'

'It was in Kate's room. She left it behind,' Samuel Tollinger's eyes wandered everywhere in the room but the Doctor's face. For such an evidently powerful man, he seemed contrite in the Doctor's presence, like a schoolchild who knows he's done wrong preparing for the inevitable scolding.

'When did she leave?' asked the Doctor, his voice quiet, his anger suddenly gone.

'Last year,' Samuel said. He finally looked the Doctor in the eyes; his turn for a little anger had arrived. 'You didn't think she'd stay here, with me, after meeting you? Once you've palled around with the cosmic hero, dear old dad the petty gangster becomes someone you want to forget you ever even knew.'

The Doctor opened his mouth to respond, possibly to apologise, but seemed to think the better of it. He stretched, took a deep breath, let the tension dissipate, and made a half-hearted attempt at a grin.

'What do you need, Samuel?' asked the Doctor.

'Someone is killing my boys, Doctor.'

'How long are we going to stay here?' asked Fitz. He took another bite of his toast, made a face and returned the remainder to his plate. While waiting for the Doctor to say something it had gone cold. Across the table, the Doctor stared at the wall, lost in thought, stirring his tea. It had probably gone cold as well.

A week had passed since their meeting with Samuel and, though it had been his most peaceful week since joining up with the Doctor, he

was starting to feel bored. He could only imagine what the eternally restless Doctor was feeling.

They had wandered the entire village, worked their way into people's confidences, and asked their questions. They had talked to the boys' friends, family, the people who discovered the bodies, and the medical examiners who performed the autopsies. Fitz was beginning to believe that they had questioned the entire population of the village. At the end of the week, it had all been for nothing. No one had seen or heard a thing. There was no visible cause of death; the young men had just stopped living.

'I don't know, Fitz,' said the Doctor. Finally, he set aside the spoon and took a sip of his tea. If it had gone cold, his face didn't show it. 'I think that we'll give our investigations a rest for today. We'll take a walk around the village, clear our heads, and see if any new ideas present themselves to us.'

Mrs Banks, the owner of the boarding house, wandered back into the kitchen and started cleaning the plates from the table. She looked at Fitz's mostly untouched breakfast and shook her head.

'You need to eat, young man,' she said to Fitz. 'You're all skin and bones.'

She gave his upper arm a pinch to prove her point. The Doctor smiled at Fitz's exaggerated yelp of pain. Mrs Banks caught the smile from the corner of her eye and turned to the Doctor. She snatched his plate, its contents still untouched, from in front of him.

'I don't know what you're smiling about. You're worse then he is.'

'I apologise, Mrs Banks. I assure you that it is no reflection on the cook. We just have a lot on our minds these days,' said the Doctor. Fitz saw the Doctor's expression change from amused to quizzical as he looked over Fitz's shoulder to the doorway. Fitz turned in his chair to look.

A woman stood in the doorway, one Fitz couldn't recognise as a resident of the village. Her hair and clothing suggested that she was young, in her late twenties, early thirties, but her face was etched with deep lines across the forehead, around the eyes and the corners of the mouth. Fitz wondered what kind of stress could have caused those lines, aged her prematurely.

Mrs Banks noticed the woman in the doorway and rushed to her side. 'I'm so sorry,' said Mrs Banks, 'Mrs Amis, this is Fitz Kreiner and Doctor James Bowman. Doctor Bowman, Mr Kreiner, this is Karen Amis. She'll be staying with us for the next two or three weeks.'

The Doctor and Fitz rose from the table and shook Karen's hand. The three of them sat at the table as Mrs Amis went to work fixing Karen's breakfast, An uncomfortable silence followed as Fitz tried to think of what to say. He didn't want to start talking about people getting killed in front of someone who was obviously already troubled.

'Are you visiting family, Mrs Amis?' asked the Doctor. Both Fitz and the Doctor were caught off guard by her reaction.

Karen's fists clenched and she shut her eyes tight. Tears began to collect in the corners, readying to fall. The origins of the lines on her face were made apparent as she strained to hold back an outburst. The Doctor was out of his seat and by her side in a second, offering a handkerchief.

'I'm sorry, Mrs Amis. I had no idea-'

'Perhaps the Doctor and Fitz can help you, Mrs Amis,' interrupted Mrs Banks. 'They're private investigators.'

This is where our cover gets blown, thought Fitz. It had seemed obvious at the time, posing as investigators hired by the families the dead young men. It was even true in a way, just not the 'family' that typically came to the mind of most people.

'Why are you here, Mrs Amis?' asked the Doctor.

'I'm looking for my son, Eric. His father and I got divorced four years ago. His father was granted custody, thanks to his employers. When I went to pick up Eric for my first visitation, the house empty. Eric and his father were gone. I've been following them as best as I can across the country. I just want to see my son.'

'Why don't you just go the police?' asked Fitz.

Karen chuckled before responding. 'Benjamin, Eric's father works for the government. His whereabouts are a national secret. He's a scientist, working on one of their top projects. So anything that keeps Benjamin happy, they do. Even if it means depriving a son of his mother.'

At those last words, Karen broke down crying again. Doctor patted

her on the back and leant in close. 'I'm sure you'll find him,' he whispered.

'So now we have to stay here until we've found out who killed Tollinger's men and where Karen's kid is?'

Fitz tried hard to keep from whinging, but an edge of exasperation made it into his voice. It wasn't an unpleasant little town, but that's all it was, a little town. No clubs, no birds, not even a decent record shop. The snow had melted leaving a grey-brown sodden landscape behind. He picked up a pebble and skipped it across a puddle that was on the verge of becoming a lake.

'You act like I've added to our workload,' the Doctor said while bringing his hand up to his chest in mock offence. The Doctor had returned to his preternaturally cheerful self since leaving the boarding house, as if he finally felt like he had all the answers figured out

'You think they're related.'

'A scientist performing secret experiments somewhere in the vicinity of a series of unexplained deaths? They're bound to be related.'

'So where are we going?'

'Across the street from the shop where the last boy was killed in a park. A park is a handy place to leave a boy while you're performing experiments. I'll wait and see if Eric or his father shows up.' The Doctor pointed to Fitz. 'I want you to keep watch nearby. The boy's more likely to talk to me if he doesn't feel intimidated but I want you to keep handy in case anything goes wrong.'

Fitz smiled. 'That almost sounds like a plan.'

The Doctor smiled back. 'It does, doesn't it?'

The Doctor popped another humbug into his mouth and returned the crumpled paper bag to his jacket pocket. He made a mental note that it was time to replenish his supply; the bag was dangerously light. He glanced in the direction where he hoped Fitz was waiting. Three hours had passed without incident and the Doctor had the luxury of sitting, even if it was only in a swing. Fitz's legs would inevitably be aching by now.

The Doctor felt the boy's presence behind him before he saw the

boy himself. The Doctor turned to look, twisting the chains that supported the swing. As soon as their eyes made contact, the boy paused in mid-step. The boy looked lost in his clothes. Everything seemed like it was two sizes too large, like the clothes were hanging off a framework with a head. Stick legs disappeared into the gaping maw of his Wellingtons. Mud stains dotted his trousers, his overcoat, even his face and hands. His hair stuck up in greasy clumps at odd angles.

'Hello,' said the Doctor quietly.

The boy did not respond, just continued to stare.

'If you want to play, go ahead. I don't mind,' said the Doctor. He let the chains of the swing untwist and turn the swing back to its original position.

The Doctor held his breath. This was the deciding moment. Ttere was nothing to keep the boy from leaving besides curiosity. He exhaled as he heard the sound of footsteps circling him. The boy continued until he was directly in front of the Doctor. He looks so serious, thought the Doctor, not like a boy ready to play.

Are you a magician?' asked the boy.

The question caught the Doctor off guard and a huge grin spread across his face. 'What makes you ask?'

'Your costume,' replied the boy. He pointed to the Doctor's velvet coat.

'I know a few tricks,' the Doctor said 'Would you like to see one?'

The boy nodded his head.

The Doctor pulled a coin from his pocket, making sure it was a local coin before showing it to the boy. It would not do to spread rumours at this stage. He held the coin up before the boy at eye level and let the boy take a good look at it before putting both hands behind his back He brought both fists before him.

'Which hand is it in?' asked the Doctor, silently hoping the boy hadn't seen the trick on television or at some friend's birthday party.

The boy pointed a grubby finger at the Doctor's right hand. The Doctor turned his hand over and unfolded his fingers with a flourish. The hand was empty. The boy pouted slightly and his eyes darted to the Doctor's left hand, just for a second. The Doctor repeated the

motion with his left hand, which was also empty.

'It's gone,' the Doctor said, adding a little surprised gasp at the end of the second word. 'Wait a minute. I think I see it. Right behind your ear.'

Reaching out for the boy's ear with the palmed coin in his hand would be the last clear memory the Doctor had of the next few minutes. As soon as his hand had neared the boy's ear, the boy had jerked away in panic. At the same instant, the pain hit the Doctor, square in the centre of his head and in his hearts, the pain of biological defence mechanisms fighting instructions to shut his body down.

The Doctor's hand jerked back to clutch at his chest and he fell from the swing onto the muddy ground beneath. The boy took a couple of steps backwards but continued to stare at the Doctor. Fighting the spasms that were pulling his muscles in every direction at once, the Doctor managed to roll over so he could look at the boy.

'Eric,' the Doctor said, straining to get the words out through teeth clenched in pain. 'Please stop. I didn't mean to scare you.'

At the mention of his name, Eric's eyes grew wide. He turned to look behind him, as if expecting a man behind him with a cue card bearing his name. The Doctor crawled a little closer to the boy. He had to do something to get the situation under control in case Eric should turn his attentions to Fitz, whose footsteps he could hear approaching fast.

'I met your mother, Eric,' the Doctor said 'She's looking for you.'

The Doctor curled into a ball as the pain spiked into his body. Just before he could no longer keep his eyes open, he saw Eric turn and run back the way he had come. A few eternal seconds later, the attack stopped.

Fitz reached the Doctor's side and dropped to his knees beside the Time Lord. His hands scrabbled at the Doctor's shirt, fumbling with the buttons while he tried to remember the CPR lessons Sam had insisted he take, along with the special instructions regarding the Doctor's biology. A small part of his mind wondered briefly on what the townspeople should think if they saw the two of them like this.

The Doctor batted Fitz's hand away. 'I'm fine,' he said, then rolled over and coughed. What seemed to Fitz to be about a pint of blood

erupted from the Doctor's mouth and splashed onto the ground. Fitz winced at the sight and helped the Doctor up into a sitting position.

'Yeah, you look fine,' said Fitz sarcastically. 'Do you want me to follow him?'

The Doctor shook his head. He tried to take a deep breath, which resulted in an unpleasant gurgling noise coming from his chest. Another bout of coughing brought up more blood, but seemed to clear up his congestion some.

'No,' said the Doctor, dabbing at the corners of his mouth with his cravat. 'He's too far away at this point. And he would probably just kill you.'

'Well then. What now?'

The Doctor rose from the swing and brushed at his coat sleeves, a futile gesture that just resulted in smearing his hands with mud.

'I need to make a few phone calls.'

Eric ran all the way home, all his usual games forgotten. Puddles were no longer mighty rivers to ford. Fences no longer hid impenetrable fortifications and bunkers. Trees no longer concealed snipers and enemy spies. Empty bottles were no longer mines or discarded mortars. This time he went straight home, splashing through puddles, splattering mud all over his trousers.

When he reached home, he crawled through the hole he had made in the wire fence. Once through, he turned and willed the hole away, restoring the fence to its original state. He took a moment to look at the blank stares on the guards outside the fence, still lost in dreams of escape from this boring duty, before removing their blinders. Eric waved at the closest guard, who returned the gesture with a slight nod of the head. As far as the guards could remember, Eric had been playing in the grounds all the time.

Eric left his Wellingtons outside the door. His father didn't care if he tracked mud through the house, but Mrs Delillo, the housekeeper, would practically explode if subjected to mud tracks throughout the house again. If she quit, Eric's father would subject him to another hour-long harangue on how hard it was to find good housekeepers with the proper security clearance.

Eric crept in his stocking feet up the stairs, hoping his father hadn't noticed his presence yet. He wanted time to go upstairs and change into some clean trousers, as well as time to consider what the man in the park had said. He was almost to his room when his father's voice came from downstairs.

'Eric, it's time for your lessons.'

Eric paused in mid-step, completely motionless. He wanted to look back, to see if his father could see him, see the state he was in. He did not look though. As long as he did not look, there was always the possibility that the voice was coming from his father's office, that he wasn't at the bottom of the stairs, that he couldn't see.

'Don't put those trousers in the laundry, either. Mrs Delillo will never stand for having to clean that kind of mess. You can wash them yourself after your lessons. Now go and get changed.'

Eric changed quickly. Now that his presence in the house was known, there was no excuse for delay. Eric's father spent most of his time alone, in his office, working on very important things, as he was quick to remind Eric at every opportunity. He allowed Eric to pretty much roam free around the house and grounds with no supervision except for Mrs Delillo and the guards. However, when it was time for Eric's lessons, no whinging, no cajoling, no tactic could delay them.

After just a couple of minutes, Eric presented himself at the door of his father's office.

'Get in the chair,' Eric's father said, without looking up from his desk. Benjamin Amis continued to write while his son crossed to the far end of the room and hoisted himself into the converted dentist's chair. He waited in the chair, suppressing the urge to shift or fidget or otherwise distract his father.

Mrs Delillo had often remarked on how much Eric resembled his father. Looking at the man now, even Eric's young mind could see the similarities. They were both short and slight for their respective ages. Without a break in his writing, Benjamin's left hand came up and ran through his tangle of unkempt black hair, a habit that had already rubbed off on the boy.

Finally, Benjamin set the pen down and crossed the room to where

the boy sat. He leaned over and held the frayed ends of the Velcro straps attached to the base of the chair open.

'Feet,' he said. Eric adjusted his legs so they fit into the slots running from the seat to the footrest of the chair. They would have to be adjusted again soon. They had started to grow tight again two moves ago. Benjamin drew the straps snug across Eric's legs and fastened them.

'Hands,' he said, and strapped Eric's obediently placed limbs to the arms of the chair. He finished by locking the boy's head into place. He unwound a cord from the nearby humming computer and cleaned the lead end with alcohol.

Even though the brace immobilising his head made it unnoticeable, Eric flinched as his father's fmgers parted the hair behind the boy's ear. The socket exposed, Benjamin plugged the computer cable into his son. The computer screen lit up with a series of lines drawing records of the rhythms that marked Eric's life, his heartbeat, his pulse, his various levels of brain activity.

Benjamin crossed to the other side of the boy, pulling a syringe from his pocket and uncapping it. He pulled the boy's sleeve up, exposing the other socket that had been permanently implanted in the boy's flesh. The need for it had become apparent after the first two months of experimentation. The boy's arm had been pocked and bruised like a heroin addict's. It had sped up the process as well. No more precious minutes were wasted looking for a usable vein.

He injected his son and tossed the used needle into a bin labelled 'medical waste' next to the computer stand. He sat in his usual chair in front of the computer, facing Eric yet off to the boy's right so the boy could see the wall directly in front of him. Benjamin's hand rested on the computer's keyboard, ready to begin as soon as the drug took effect.

'Dad?' Eric asked.

Benjamin started slightly. He thought his son understood the need for quiet during his lessons. A controlled environment was important. 'Yes Eric?' he responded impatiently.

'Will I -' Eric's voice faded a bit as the drug started to take hold. Benjamin turned down the room's lights as Eric's pupils dilated,

throwing the white square of light on the wall in front of Eric into sharp relief. 'Will I ever see mum again?'

There was no point in Benjamin replying. The vacant stare on Eric's face, the slack jaw, the limp limbs, Eric was under. Benjamin scowled and punched a button on the keyboard, starting the slide show.

An image on the wall filled Eric's slack gaze, an image of a man with no face in coveralls. Benjamin's pre-recorded voice accompanied the show as the man himself turned to monitor his son's statistics.

'This is an Auton,' his voice says, level but firm, like a schoolteacher reciting some mundane lesson. 'The Autons are bad men.'

'I can't believe you saw him,' Karen said. Disbelief, joy, a tinge of awe, all fought for dominance as she looked at Fitz through teary eyes.

The Doctor had told Karen that they had seen the boy as soon as they returned to the boarding house. When Fitz had started to interject about how that sighting had ended, the Doctor shot him a silencing look. Fitz wondered how long they would be able to keep information like that away from the boy's mother, especially if the Doctor succeeded in reuniting the two.

'Wait here,' she said, and placed a hand on Fitz's chest before turning and running up the stairs to her room.

Through the doorway to the kitchen, Fitz could see the Doctor talking on his portable phone, the cobbled together monstrosity that he had pulled out of his pocket rather than use the one in the boarding house. 'They can't trace this one,' he had said. Even while talking on the phone, the Doctor couldn't keep still. He paced; he gestured and gesticulated as if he forgot that the party on the other end couldn't see him while he talked.

She returned and pressed a small piece of paper into his hand. It was a photograph, wallet-sized, a family portrait taken in happier

times. There they were, Karen and Benjamin, husband and wife, with their beloved son seated between them. Four years of being carried around the country, handed to strangers and policeman in the hope of stirring some recognition, some memory, out of them had taken their toll on the tiny momento. Its edges were frayed and soiled. Like Karen, the search had aged it faster than time alone would have.

The Doctor joined the two of them in the hall, scowling. 'UNIT knows about Eric. They've been helping his father hide him.'

'I told you,' wailed Karen. It scared Fitz how easily her joy shattered into panic. He wondered how many times had she come close, then had the opportunity of seeing her child again stolen away. 'They're helping him. They'll take Eric away again. I'll never see him.'

'Calm down. They don't know we've found him,' said the Doctor soothingly. He grasped her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. Her head hung limp on her neck, staring at the ground in hopelessness. He placed a finger under her chin and gently lifted her head until she looked him directly in the eyes. 'I promise you. You will see your son again.'

'So what are we going to do?' asked Fitz.

The Doctor did not respond. He continued staring into Karen's eyes until the sobbing stopped, until the gloom drained from her expression. Finally, he turned to Fitz.

'First, we go see Samuel. Then we return to the park and wait for Eric, so we can arrange a meeting. We had better go now. I don't think we have much time.'

The office was exactly the same as before. Samuel even wore the same suit he had worn at their first meeting, at least the same design. Fitz pictured a massive closet filled with endless reiterations of the same suit, something that Samuel and the Doctor would have in common.

The only major difference this time was that the Doctor had taken the proffered seat, channelling his restless energy into taking apart the portable phone he had been using. It had already looked like a normal phone that had been infected by some horrible metallic fungus. Now, its resemblance to any kind of ordinary appliance was dwindling as the

Doctor pulled out and replaced component after component without even looking at the device.

'I know who killed your employees,' the Doctor stated. You had to give it to him, thought Fitz. He doesn't go out of his way to make things easier.

Samuel sat up straight in his chair. Fitz could hear the lummox guarding the door suck in a deep breath. These men were ready, at this instant, to go avenge their associates' deaths. It would not matter that the killer was an eight-year-old boy. He wondered how the Doctor could stop them.

'Who is it, Doctor?' asked Samuel.

'You owe me a favour, Samuel,' said the Doctor. 'I'm calling it in. We will do this my way.'

Samuel's expression changed to frustration. He knew, with those words, that his revenge would be curbed. 'Don't we always?' he spat out.

Fitz stood, peering around the alley corner, as the Doctor talked to Eric. He wanted to be closer, ready to drag the Doctor to safety should the boy attack again, but the Doctor had insisted on dealing with Eric alone. Barring that, he wished he could hear what was being said, but, even on this quiet evening, they were speaking too softly for him to hear.

He took time out from spying on the pair to look down the street, towards the boarding house. It had taken the Doctor close to half an hour to convince Karen that she couldn't come with him while he met with Eric, that arrangements had to be made beforehand so she could be reunited with her son. Still, Fitz felt the need to keep an eye out for her. Just in case, left on her own, alone with her thoughts, she changed her mind and decided to follow them.

This meeting between the Doctor and Eric came to a much calmer conclusion as the boy turned and ran off, back the way he came. The Doctor rose from the swing and waved to Fitz, a large smile on his face. Fitz found himself smiling back. Everything was going to turn out fine.

'This is a Sea Devil. Sea Devils are bad men.'

Benjamin Amis held a pen in his left hand, clicking it on and off in a gesture born of impatience and frustration. His right hand held the telephone handset, the source of his impatience and frustration. Every time he needed something done, a new piece of equipment, a new housekeeper, funding, anything, he had to jump these bureaucratic hurdles. He didn't know why they bothered being so obstinate. He always got what he wanted.

'I'm telling you, I saw him, talking to my son. I followed Eric to the park, and there he was, waiting for him.' Benjamin did not bother to listen as the voice at the other end started spouting nonsense. He had to admit, Eric had impressed him with his ability to fool the guards and alter the fence. The boy had obviously started to gain some conscious control of his abilities.

The voice at the other end stopped, waiting for an answer.

'Yes I'm sure it was him. He was in that damn book you gave me. He was under consideration for your little alphabetical catalogue of atrocities. The one with the velvet coat. No, the brown haired one.'

The voice at the other end put him on hold, gone to seek advice from someone capable of making a decision, no doubt.

'This is an Uritanian. Uritanians are bad men.' Eric eyes stared rapt, glazed, passive. His vital signs traced their way across the screen in smooth, even regularity. Another session was passing perfectly. Things had settled into a perfect routine now. Nothing could be allowed to stop it.

The voice at the other end came back with instructions.

'No, we are not moving out. I am sick of moving. I am tired of moving. You send some men here and you deal with the Doctor or Zachary or whatever you call him and my bitch of an ex-wife. I don't care if you have to shoot them both dead to do it.' He almost slammed the receiver down before remembering the session raking place on the other side of the room. He crossed over to take his place in front of the monitor.

'This is a Yeti. Yeti are bad men.'

He started to ready the equipment to stop monitoring and start analysing the data At first he had thought it typically stupid military

thinking, insisting that the programming be in alphabetical order, but it had proved useful. It made it easier to tell when their programming ended, so he could shut down the monitors before his own programming began. His hand hovered over the enter key.

'This is a Zygon. Zygons are bad men.'

His hand pressed the key. The monitors switched off as the machine started analysing the collected data. What came next was between father and son. No one would take his perfect subject away.

'This is your mother.'

The Doctor waited on the swing again. It was beginning to feel like an old familiar chair. He glanced at his pocket watch before returning it to his waistcoat pocket. The appointed time was minutes away. Eric would be arriving at any moment. He stole a glance to the alley. Fitz and Karen weren't visible, but he knew they were there, just out of sight. Just across from the park, three men unloaded crates from a lorry. The Doctor hoped the men wouldn't scare Eric off

They didn't. Eric gave barely a second's glance towards the truck as he entered the park from the opposite side, having cut across some people's yards to avoid the roads. He wore the same ill-fitting clothes and Wellingtons as he had on the previous two occasions. However, the Doctor noted, with some cheer, that he had washed his face and combed his hair in anticipation of his reunion with his mother.

'Hello Eric,' said the Doctor, He smiled at the boy and was pleasantly surprised when the boy smiled back.

'Eric,' said Karen. She started forward, but Fitz held her back. He tried to be gentle but firm.

'Not yet,' he said, 'not until the Doctor gives the signal.' He relaxed his grip as she sank back against the wall, her eyes trying to will the boy to look her way, to sense that she was there.

'Where's my mother?' asked Eric. He knew the answer wouldn't be coming immediately when he saw the smile fade from the Doctor's face. The Doctor was looking over Eric's shoulder, to whatever stood behind the boy. He turned.

'Yes, where is Eric's mother?' said Benjamin. He approached from

the same direction as Eric, having followed the boy all the way to the park. He looked more absurd than the Doctor, striding across a muddy park under a grey sky wearing a crisp white lab coat. He stepped gingerly, his loafers offering little purchase on the slick ground.

'Is she even here at all?' continued Benjamin as he approached. 'Or is it just some story you've told him so you can take him away from me?'

Eric looked at the Doctor imploringly. He was beyond suspicion. He only wanted confirmation. The Doctor shook his head.

'If s not a story, Eric. I promise. She's waiting for you.'

Benjamin bounded the few remaining steps forward and grabbed the Doctor by the lapels of his coat. The Doctor didn't even rise from the swing. He didn't want Eric to witness someone hurting his father, even in retaliation. There was no telling what damage it might do to the boy, or what damage the boy might do. Benjamin brought his face up to the Doctor's, so close that the tips of their noses touched.

'I know about you,' Benjamin growled. The Doctor could smell alcohol on the father's breath. He had apparently needed a little liquid courage for the confrontation. 'Your interference in my life, Eric's life, is over. Our mutual friends will be here soon.'

The Doctor's mind raced to piece together a plan of action to replace the one that was falling apart.

Fitz watched in panic at the confrontation in the park. He cursed under his breath as his mind debated whether or not to hold to the plan and wait for the Doctor's signal or to just rush out there and come to the Time Lord's aid. The conflict took up so much of his attention that he didn't notice that Karen had slipped out of the alley until she was almost to the park's edge, too late to stop.

'Eric!' Karen yelled with joy and relief. She ran to the boy, her arms stretched out in front of her, ready to give the boy a hug so tight and so long that it might make up for all the hugs that had been stolen from them over the years. The boy turned and his eyes lit up at the sight of his mother. His mouth opened ready to call for his mother with the same enthusiasm she had shown.

No noise left his mouth, though. If anyone capable of lip reading had

been in a position to see, they would have seen the words 'bad man' twist themselves across his lips.

In mid-stride, Karen's eyes glassed over. Her heart stopped beating. Her lungs stopped breathing. Deprived of directions from the brain, her legs folded under her and she pitched face forward into the mud, her arms still out-stretched, four feet short of her only child. For a few seconds, it seemed like a total silence imposed itself on the world and everyone in it, until broken by a tiny voice.

'Mum?' Eric gasped.

The boy distracted, the Doctor threw Benjamin off with ease and ran to Karen's side. He rolled her over, checked her pulse and her breath, knowing what he would find but feeling the need to try. He placed both hands over heart and started to apply regular pressure in an attempt to get her re-started. He pinched her nose and breathed into her mouth to try and get her lungs breathing again.

Eric stood looking on, frozen in shock, tears starting to flaw from his eyes. Benjamin picked himself from the ground where the Doctor had thrown him, his white lab coat now almost completely covered in mud. He walked slowly over to where the Doctor was attempting to revive Karen and crouched on the opposite side.

'How do you like that, bitch?' Benjamin said, and chuckled.

The Doctor paused in his life-saving attempt to look at the man. horrified. He looked back and forth between the two, father and son, one satisfied, the other sobbing. The realisation hit him.

'What did you do to him?' asked the Doctor. Hearing the voice. Eric paused, rubbing his eyes so he could see the man ask his father the question. Those big soulful eyes, that had shown such kindness to him before, now pierced his father with accusation. 'How could you make him do this?'

The question the Doctor asked had two meanings, to one of which Eric knew the answer. Too young to understand the actions of how his father could make him do something like this, he could understand the intent behind them. He remembered the sounds of screaming and shattering echoing through their house into his dark bedroom as he tried to sleep. He remembered the names his called his mother when she was not around, names he did understand but whose delivery

made their meaning clear. Eric not need to look at his father, to see the grin on his face as watched the Doctor's fruitless efforts to revive his ex-wife, to know the truth, and to know what he had to do.

The smile vanished from Benjamin Amis' face as he fell over, dead before he hit the ground. The Doctor's head snapped around to look at Eric. The boy's face twisted in confusion and grief. Tears flowed freely from his eyes, forging salty rivers down either cheek. His breathing grew steadily faster and shallower. The pain was like a heavy weight in his stomach, folding him over, pulling his shoulders together and his head down.

His post abandoned, the signal ignored, Fitz ran towards the tableau, intent on carrying away the Doctor before the force he could feel building in the air surrounding the park reached its breaking point

'Eric,' whispered the Doctor. 'No. Don't'

It was like the cord drawing the boy together broke. His arms flung outward. His head snapped back and his mouth opened to its limits, practically unhinging the boy's jaw as he wailed a loud wordless wail of pain and mourning. The ground shook as if vibrating in time with the boy's sobbing. The two nearest legs of the swing set tore themselves free of the ground, raining mud and dirt and small chunks of concrete on the Doctor and the bodies of Eric's parents. The metal groaned and strained as the posts twisted and reached skyward before returning earthward and scrabbling for purchase in the wet ground.

The Doctor ducked as a chunk of metal ripped free of the carousel whipped through the air where his head had just been. The stones forming the low wall surrounding the park started to jostle loose of each other and shoot straight into the sky. He reached in his coat pocket, silently cursing himself for not thinking quicker, for getting distracted as events got so out of control that both of Eric's parents lie dead by the boy's own mind. His hand found the rewired phone he had worked on for the past day and pulled it free.

The Doctor pressed the activation button on the handset. Eric's wail changed pitch to a scream of pain as his hand clutched his head. He collapsed to the ground. As he lost consciousness, the havoc in the park came to a sudden end. The ground ceased to shake. The now motionless playground equipment fell still to the earth. The Doctor felt

let down by his handiwork. He had not intended the device to cause Eric any pain. The Doctor made a mental note to make a few adjustments to the device as he ran across the ground and threw himself across the unconscious boy to shield him from the stones now falling back to Earth.

The rain of stones ended, the Doctor rose up and gathered Eric into his arms. He caught sight of Fitz picking his way across the churned up ground and motioned Fitz to join him.

'UNIT's coming,' the Doctor said. 'I have to get Eric out of here. Can you take over trying to revive Karen?'

Fitz nodded dumbly as he took in the scene around him. The twisted metal, the scattered stones, the churned up ground with two prone bodies in the centre of it all, it looked like a war zone, not a place where children played. He dropped to his knees next to Karen and started with her heart.

The Doctor ran to the lorry. The three men who had been unloading the crates were now cowering behind the lorry, weapons drawn. The Doctor looked at them with disdain and inclined his head in the direction of the back of the lorry.

'Help me get him in,' ordered the Doctor. They jumped to their feet and holstered their weapons. Embarrassed to be caught in their fear, they rushed to the back of the vehicle and bundled both the Doctor and the boy inside. They lowered the boy onto the cot, the only cargo they had been carrying apart from the empty crates and a couple of chairs.

The Doctor took his seat by the head of the cot where he could monitor Eric's progress on this first stage of the trip. He glanced at the chair that he had expected to seat Karen and swallowed. So much had gone wrong. Hopefully there was still a chance to get some things right. He rapped a knuckle against the glass separating the cab from the rest of the lorry. Samuel Tollinger's face came into view.

'Go,' mouthed the Doctor silently. Samuel nodded, and put the lorry into gear.

Fitz dropped to his knees next to Karen and started with her heart. Palms stacked above her heart, he pressed down. After a few repetitions he moved up and, pinching her nose, he breathed into her

mouth. She felt like she was already getting cold. He wished he had a blanket to cover her, to keep her warm.

Press. Press. Press. Press. Check her heartbeat. Nothing.

He remembered when he had first met her, seeing the lines on her face and wondering what had aged her prematurely.

Breath. Breath. Breath. Breath. Check her heartbeat. Nothing.

He remembered the look on her face when the Doctor told her they had found her son.

Press. Press. Press. Press. Nothing.

He remembered the tatty family photo she had shown him, tiny wrinkles and tears surrounding the loving family, all smiles.

Breath. Breath. Breath. Nothing.

He didn't notice the tears falling onto her face.

Press. Press. Press. Nothing.

He kept working on her, even after his vision grew so blurry that he couldn't see her anymore, until his hands and arms ached from the strain, until his own lungs screamed from the attempt of filling hers.

Breath. Breath. Nothing.

He didn't notice the sounds of the trucks stopping outside the park, or the sounds of men in boots running towards the park.

Press. Press. Nothing.

He kept working, until the men with rifles pulled him limp and sobbing off her dead body.

Under a cloudless sky, The Doctor watched the men rebuilding the park. Samuel's men had finished loading the remains of the destroyed playground equipment into their lorry and were now positioning the new equipment, equipment paid for by Samuel. Samuel himself worked with Fitz, rebuilding the low wall. The both of them were drenched in sweat and covered in mud, but the Doctor had caught them sharing a laugh over a mistake one of them had made.

He admired all of them, even Samuel and his 'associates,' finding some joy so soon after such pain, finding a constructive way to work through their collective grief. When they were finished, they would attach a memorial plaque to one of the walls, with the names of Karen and Samuel's slain men.

He turned and walked away; best to leave them to work through this part on their own. The local pub had put a couple of tables out on the pavement to take advantage of the sun. Perhaps he could convince them into brewing him a cup of tea

At one of the outdoor tables, a familiar face waited. The Doctor scowled as he took the offered seat.

'Bambera,' the Doctor said in acknowledgement. It seemed to be as much of a greeting as she was going to get. It wasn't a good sign that he was using her last name, especially for this version.

She shifted in her seat. It wasn't the first time that her duties had made her feel uncomfortable, but it was aggravated by the fact that it was him. He would not even look her in the face. He sat in the chair opposite her, looking down at the street, back at the park and the men working there.

'They-' She paused. 'We want the boy back, Doctor.'

'I imagine you do,' he said evenly. For some reason, that upset her even more, that he wouldn't get angry with her, act outraged, do something to allow her to get angry right back at him. Instead, he offered no provocation beyond being right.

'What category does Eric fall in?' the Doctor continued. 'Eric, that's his name you know. Not the boy or the subject. What column bears his name in your ledger? Natural resource? Experimental subject? National secret?'

He finally turned to face her and it made her wish he would go back to ignoring her. Those eyes of his, the eyes that had seen things she would never understand, bore right into hers. He looked at her the way he looked at monsters. She knew there was no point in pressing the issue. The look told her what category she fit in the Doctor's ledger. He had denied less at greater cost than she had the power to make him pay many times before.

She nodded towards the park, at the men working there, the criminals that the Doctor had turned to when she had let him down. 'I don't think much of the type of people you're keeping company with these days, Doctor,' she said.

'I could say the same to you, Winifred,' he said, and left her at the

table, wondering.

The park was a hundred times bigger than any park he had snuck into before. The grass was soft and green and moist, but the ground beneath was firm, not mud. There was no need for his Wellingtons, or 'boots' as Anna had called them. The great rusty orange suspension bridge spanned the bay that demarcated one edge of the park.

Eric looked to make sure neither Anna nor Daniel were looking his way before clumsily trying to wipe off the greasy sun block she had smeared on his nose. 'You've spent too much time indoors,' she had said. 'You'll burn and peel inside an hour without something on you.'

He held the highest ground in the park, the top of a small castle constructed of wood, its comers clad in automobile tyres. It had no metal poles, no bolts holding it together. Everything was different here. A slide led back to the ground, but he was taking the opportunity of this vantage point to look over the entire park. He imagined claiming it as his new kingdom.

Another child squeezed in next to him. Eric couldn't tell how much older the new boy was, just that he towered over Eric. He must have been at least six inches taller. The boy looked at Eric, impatient.

'Come on kid. Move it,' the new boy ordered Eric. Eric remained still, his gaze fixed on the boy. The boy shoved Eric slightly, causing him to take a small stumbling step backwards before regaining his footing. 'Come on. You don't own the park.

Move it.'

Eric did not move. He drew in a deep breath, ready.

'Eric,' called out Anna. She stood, staring straight at him, her arms folded, her book steepled on the bench behind her. 'No.'

Eric looked at her, his expression the same as any boy caught doing something he knew was not allowed. She stood firm. He knew she would use the box if needed, but she would be disappointed in him, something even worse than the missing feeling that the box caused. Daniel had taken notice and now he looked at Eric, his book resting open in his lap.

'What did she tell you, boy?' asked Daniel. His sonorous voice carried across the air so well it sounded like he was standing right next

to Eric instead of twenty or so feet away. It was a voice that sounded like it was produced by some ancient mechanism of oak and brass, with an accent like Mrs McJunkin's, one of his father's old caretakers. She was the one who had quit after seeing the chairs walk across the room. Daniel snapped his book shut and rose from the bench, collecting Anna's book as well.

'It's time to go anyway,' he said. 'I have to get back to the lab after dinner. Larna will be waiting.' He motioned for Eric to come down. Eric slid down the slide, the near altercation with the other boy already forgotten, and ran to join them.

'I'm sorry Mr Joyce,' Eric said. He said it in a small voice and he hoped using Daniel's last name had its usual effect. It did.

Daniel smiled and ruffled the boy's hair. 'I told you to call me Daniel,' he said. Eric returned the smile, looking forward to the ride over the bridge, over the hills and through the tall buildings, past the bright lights. He looked forward to going home.

The Painting

Robert Smith

She was alone in the art gallery. Not completely alone, she supposed. There were the distant footsteps of other visitors and staff echoing vaguely throughout the building. But for the moment at least, she was alone. Alone in this room of colour, of form, of beauty, of talent.

She wondered what it took to create something like that. To actually turn your thoughts and feelings into an expression of colour and lines and shapes that could be enjoyed by someone else. Someone else peeking into your soul. And once you created it, how did you cope with other people looking at it?

The painting caught her eye. It wasn't especially pretty or striking or clever. Just a house. Strange really, since all the other paintings in this room were so bright and angry and irregular. They all felt as though the artist had been making up for lack of talent by being harsh and outspoken, forcing attention upon themselves by daring to stand out. They were all much the same. This painting, on the other hand, was simple and calm. It lurked quietly against the plastered wall, like a colourful shadow that hadn't been told how to stand up by itself.

She marvelled at the depiction of wind in the painting. It was just a picture, but it was windy. The long, light green grass was swaying slightly, the woman's colourful dress billowing out as she held onto her hat. The woman's other hand was stretched out, reaching into thin air.

The dog's rich brown fur swished from side to side. The man in the field didn't seem bothered by the wind. His cap was pulled low, but that was the only concession made to the elements. He bent down over the wheel of the tractor, a checked shirt peering out from bright red overalls. Frozen in time.

The blue box seemed incongruous. It sat quietly in the distance, as still as the scenery, but somehow different, as though it didn't belong. It was odd the way you could look at a work of art and decide that you knew better than the artist did. You could point to something and

proclaim with great certainty that that simply wasn't right, it just didn't belong there. As though you had every right in the world to dictate the form and function of the piece.

She wondered if the dog was barking. The painting might have been successful at depicting wind, but it couldn't quite manage sound. The dog was a beauty, big and friendly looking. The sort of dog she'd love without question. Pity about the weather, though. Heavy clouds seemed to encroach, perhaps threatening rain. Until then, there was grass swaying in the wind. Just the sort of long grass for a dog to play in, carefree as a dog could be, while its master fixed the tractor wheel.

The house was made of wood. Real wood. Bound together firmly in the knowledge that a lifetime of facing the elements wouldn't sway its sturdiness. There was a thatched roof at a steep angle. The woman was standing just in front of the open door, looking across at her husband in the distance. Reaching into thin air.

Further back, beyond the limits of the farm there were trees. Not straight storybook trees, but real, tired trees. They were twisted and bent and old, the sort of trees who could tell you stories and never stop. Somehow they'd survived. Borne all that pain through the struggle of surviving, eking out a meagre existence from a harsh world. How did they stand it? So many seedlings must have been blown into the ground nearby. Some might have grown, only to have died one winter because they weren't strong enough to survive. How did the trees keep going, watching their children die year after year?

How do any of us keep going? The urge to survive pushes us forward, makes us consider options that would previously have been dismissed as impossible. Gobbling up life, we face incredible odds and surmount them. Force ourselves ever forwards, usually unthinking, in a desperate bid to survive, to thrive, to replicate ourselves. Impassively, angrily, deviously, we all do it.

There was a woman in the room with her. She turned around to see the woman peering at some of the other paintings. The woman was almost a work of art herself. A colourful dress showed off just enough of the figure within. A large hat was perched on her head, the hair beneath tousled and swept. The woman noticed her and smiled a broad, open smile.

'Hello.'

She wasn't sure what to say. 'Hi.' It seemed like the best option.

'Not very good, are they? Too much colour in most of these.' She gestured expansively around the room. The woman hadn't noticed the painting, hovering silently against the far wall.

'I suppose.'

'It's all a bit monotonous, if you ask me. And why do they insist on hanging these garish paintings in such a bare room?'

'Maybe they think that if they put in a pot plant or something it'd show up the meaningless afunctionality of the paintings.'

'Oh well,' said the woman, not really listening. 'Plenty more paintings around. I might pop outside. Looks like a storm coming.

'Uh, okay.'

'Take care.

'Bye.'

The woman headed out in the direction of the exit. Her footsteps clattered for a few moments, the sound slowly fading. She turned back to the painting. The twisted trees in the distance seemed to shudder under the clouds. Not in fear, but in resignation. Another storm to survive, another day of the eternal work that was staying alive. Maybe the farmer was trying to fix the tractor wheel before the storm hit.

It obviously didn't bother the dog, who was enjoying the romp in the grass, but not straying too far from his master. The wind blew through his coat, ruffling it slightly as he ran. Nearby, the house sat as sturdy as ever. The door was bolted shut, probably as a precaution against the coming storm. The blue box didn't look as sturdy, but somehow she knew it could stand against the elements forever and look none the worse for wear.

She wondered why the painting was such a source of fascination for her. It was nothing spectacular. She looked around the room. There were at least four or five better painted pictures in this room alone. She looked over in the corner of the room. The tree in the pot didn't seem especially happy, here in this place of false nature. Poor thing, trapped forever in a prison of clay. She wondered if you could set a tree loose. It looked quite forlorn, all twisted and bent and old.

The painting still sat soundlessly against the wall. She gazed again

at it, trying to divine its secrets. The horizon stretched behind the house, broken only by the sturdiness of the incongruous, iconic box. The grass was fluctuating slightly in time with the wind. The farmer's bright red overalls and the dog's beautiful brown fur were the only splashes of brightness in the otherwise drab picture. The grass was faded, the season taking its toll.

This artistic analysis was tiring work. She moved back slowly and then sat down on the large wheel that was lying flat in the centre of the room. It wasn't quite as high as a normal seat, but it was close. She perched on the edge and stared up at the painting. Just a house in a meadow, a blue box and a man staring at a tractor with three wheels.

She became aware of a sound behind her. As she turned, the large smelly animal launched itself at her. She laughed, playfully trying to get it to stop licking her. The dog was beautiful. Huge paws rested themselves on her chest and rich brown fur dangled in her face. The long, sticky tongue caressed her jawline.

The dog paused for a moment. It cocked its head, then shook itself, the fur wavering with the motion. It turned and dashed out of the room, in the pursuit of some other excitement. She sat still for a moment, the excitement of the intrusion fading.

The painting stared down at her and she stared up into it. A simple painting, just a man crouching in an empty meadow, with a blue box in the distance. The painting sat quietly against the wooden wall. Real wood. Solidly bound. Next to the painting the door was bolted shut, as though it could keep the room out.

She looked up. There was a storm coming. Reaching back, she used the bulk of the vehicle to haul herself upright. Looking steadily into the painting she saw the boldness, the stark simplicity of a box humming silently in a meadow.

The wind rustled her hair somewhat. It was getting colder and the storm was approaching. She moved out of the way of the fanner as he made his way over to the tractor, one wheel lying flat on the ground. Her eyes never left the painting. So beautiful. A faded green meadow. Completely still.

She started suddenly, as a presence emerged from the box in the corner of the room. Her attention was dragged towards him, as though

by sheer force of personality. His whole body seemed poised, as though the energy inside him was trying not to explode outwards. His hair was only barely under control, with coils ready to spring forth at a moment's notice. He appeared to run on static electricity.

His enormous eyes seemed to burn through her for a moment and she felt herself wilt under his gaze. Then, suddenly and melodramatically, his entire face burst into the most encompassing smile she'd ever imagined. He grasped her hand and shook it so vigorously that he might have been trying to transfer some of his own energy to her by sheer personality.

'Thank you,' he boomed. 'Of course, with that thing over there putting out a level five reading on the Riehm-Balakrishnan scale, you can probably only perceive reality as a temporary construct. I've often wondered what that would be like. Would you like a- No, I don't suppose you would.' And with that he was gone, swallowed up by the box as quickly as he had appeared. She heard a sound as she turned her eyes back towards the painting, but in moments it had faded and the box had gone.

She looked past the house to see the twisted trees ready to bear the first onslaught of the approaching storm. They seemed so tired, so weary and yet completely unable to give up living. The long grass swished around her ankles as the wind rustled through it. In the distance the dog barked with joy as it dashed through the field. Its master crouched by the tractor, the flat wheel on the ground by his feet. To her left, she saw the woman walking slowly towards the house. She held onto her hat and the wind billowed her colourful dress slightly.

Next to the open door was a frame. She leaned forward. There was a small plaque at the base of the frame. She peered at it. “Family of three and a dog face the oncoming storm." The woman was on the porch with her now. She looked over at the woman, who was holding onto her hat with one hand. The woman reached out her other hand. She reached over and took it.

The Shadow Knows...

Wendy Padbury

The shock was almost too much for her. 'Get away from him!' she screamed, as the towering figure closed in on the Doctor. 'Leave him alone!'

'Never! Your friend has asked for this...' it laughed, and continued to move forward. Zoe knew there was little she could do to make the beast stop. She looked around for something, anything she could use to buy the Doctor a few precious moments. It was too late!

'Zoe! Oh, my word! Stop him, Zoe!' the Doctor cried, helpless in the large, black chair that the monster had strapped him into. Her eyes wide with fear, Zoe lunged for a silver flask which stood just beyond the range of her fingertips. It was her only hope; she reached. Reached...

'No! Not that!' the voice boomed, but she could see fear written across that immense face, and that was just enough to give Zoe the added push she needed. She stretched as far as she could and curled her hand around the base of the flask while the other hand found the trigger mechanism at the top. She aimed at the dark shape before her. 'Stand away from him! I mean it! Stand away from him, now!' and her finger began to push the trigger in slow motion. Everything was in slow motion...

She could see the Doctor; could hear him telling her to push the button, but it was all so slow. The huge shadow settled over her as the creature's snarling face turned to face her.

She.

Had.

To.

Hit.

The...

Trigger!

Time raced forward in a blur of movement and noise. Before she

realised, she had hit the creature full in the face with the jet of bubbling liquid. The Doctor cheered, but the beast was clutching its face. Dark, liquid drips fell from between its huge hands, and it roared and roared and roared...

'Well done, Zoe!' the Doctor laughed, attempting to clap his hands with joy, but failing. She had better quickly unstrap the Doctor befor—

She screamed as the creature picked her up and held her high in the air. This was it! There was no way out for either of them now...

A voice crackled through the tiny communication device set high into the wall. Could this be help on the way?

'Five minutes to curtain! Five minutes to curtain, Mr Welles!'

'No! I am undone!' the creature wailed, and set Zoe back down. Zoe turned and looked up into the dripping, hound-dog face of her tormentor. 'I knew I couldn't leave the two of you alone without you getting into trouble,' she scolded. 'Look at the state of his face!'

The Doctor sat, eyes peering up from under the shaggy fringe of his unruly hair. 'Ah, well, yes...' the Doctor stammered. 'I'm rather afraid that was my fault, Zoe. I asked Orson for some advice on disguises,' he said. 'You never know when it may prove useful.'

She folded her arms and tried her best to look annoyed, but the sight of the Doctor with burnt cork blackening his face in a patchy mess, and the Doctor's old friend Orson with his stage make-up dripping onto the dressing room carpet made her smile. She was glad to see the Doctor enjoying himself.

He'd managed to get them here despite a few false starts in the TARDIS, and had been eager to introduce his companions to this extraordinary man. Welles and the Doctor seemed so alike to her: both had a childlike sense of fun and curiosity, and the fire of high intelligence burned brightly behind each man's eyes. They were the perfect partnership. However, she thought, both acted like naughty schoolboys whenever they thought nobody was watching.

None of them knew what they had to face when the time came to go back to the TARDIS, so it was good to relax and laugh together for a while. Besides, she had decided she like New York in this moment of history.

Zoe decided to leave the two friends to talk; she wanted to explore the theatre anyway and see for herself this ancient form of entertainment. She moved towards the dressing-room door. 'I think I shall go and find Jamie, if you two will excuse me.' As she left the room, she heard the deep, laughter-filled voice of the actor drop to a whisper.

'Well, my dear Doctor, seeing as you've obviously changed your mind about blacking-up...' said Welles before breaking into low, infectious laughter. 'Why don't you tell me more about my namesake, H.G. I've been toying with an idea for my radio show at Halloween...'

The Wings of a Butterfly

COLIN BAKER

It had all started when the Doctor was visiting the Gallifreyan Academy of Historical Science to deliver a paper on the Viability of Time Displacement Correction in the Event of Distortion.

'Let me get this right...' The Doctor had been intrigued by Duosotheros' request. 'You want me to travel to this place - what's its name?'

'Byxor.'

'In the constellation of Chlamys?' A memory had stirred in the Doctor's mind. He rarely forgot a planet he had visited, but detail sometimes eluded him.

'Yes,' Duotheros had replied. 'It is really very odd. They were a very stable Tellurian style civilisation who had successfully negotiated, and it has to be said with unusual ease for humans with democratic institutions, their potentially destructive post atomic phase and were a significant force for development within their proximate star system. Then suddenly Pfui! They were gone. Destroyed by some cataclysmic event which was generated somehow on their planet, and which subsequent spectroscopic analysis proclaims to be a non spontaneous, interventionist event.'

The Doctor was aware of Duotheros' tendency to call a spade a metallic manual pulverised rock displacement device, but was anxious to get to the point.

'You mean it was not natural?'

'Decidedly not. Nor indeed was it generated externally.'

Duotheros was a Pan-cosmic Historian (Grade 1) whose speciality was the study of Planets in the Outer Galaxies whose life forms, by reasons of colonisation or planned evolution, mimicked to varying degrees the evolutionary development of Earth. Duotheros knew the Doctor was somewhat unconventional in his approach to most things and usually disaproved of him. But Byxor had troubled him. He felt the

Doctor would have less qualms than most Time Lords about travelling back to visit extinguished civilisations and even more importantly the Doctor was, to his certain knowledge, endowed with limitless curiosity about - well - everything really.

'And you want to know why?' the Doctor prompted.

'Affirmative Doctor. I have spent decades completing my past and future history of that sector and abominate the notion that my researches have been frustrated by the physical excision of my natural market for the dissemination and publication of that History!'

So the Doctor had travelled to the time co-ordinates provided by the Historian and in a series of backward temporal kangaroo hops from the moment of Byxor's untimely Armageddon had discovered the extraordinary series of events which had destroyed an undeniably great civilisation.

'Well Doctor?' Duotheros could barely restrain his impatience.

'It is a case of the hurricane caused by the beating of the butterfly's wings, I'm afraid,' the Doctor sighed.

'What? Please explain yourself, Doctor!'

'Well, it appears it all started when a pair of trousers fell down...' The Doctor paused for effect and resumed immediately when he saw the academic struggling to control his impatience and reaching for the heavy paperweight made of Selenium Basalt on his desk. 'The trousers fell down in a crowded street in the middle of the central hub city of the planetary capital of Byxor. They fell down because of human error. The waistband and fastening had been tacked in preparation, but not subsequently stitched. The single thread had simply given way.

'Human beings, universally, are diverted, distracted and delighted by such events and in the ensuing merriment, a pickpocket took the opportunity to ply his sinuous trade. Having removed the personal mobile transport facilitator of his victim he located the vehicle which it powered and, in a fit of unwonted generosity, gave his foot powered wheeled vehicle to a young boy on a street corner and drove off, unaware of the stepping stone to destiny that he had laid behind him.

'The boy cycled off unsteadily but happily on his first ever bicycle

ride. He wobbled into the path of a multiple goods transport machine, which, swerving to avoid him, ploughed into a high voltage electricity sub station plunging the entire manufacturing sector into a powerless state, which took hours to rectify.

'At the moment of re-electrification, in a vector module assembly plant adjacent to the scene of the accident, the manufacturing line jerked back into life. A line of sixteen modules were imprinted twice with circuitry and were subsequently installed in the failsafe navigation and propulsion system of an aerial transport drone, which was used to convey fissile materials to the capital's central nuclear generation plant. When the drone's automatic systems developed a fault, the back up system was deployed and the doubly imprinted vector modules activated.

'As luck would have it, the drone was passing over the only active parapsion volcanic fissure on Byxor. The drone accelerated to sub light speed as it dived vertically into the molecular soup in the mantle of the planet. The fissile material reacted with the thereby accelerated neutrinos and the planet literally exploded.'

Duotheros stared at the Doctor for a long moment before slowly exhaling the breath that he suddenly realised he had been holding during the unfolding of this litany of tragic destruction.

'You mean that Byxor was destroyed because a man's trousers fell down? A planet which was going to spearhead the universal peace accord of the ninth quintillennium, which was going to produce Mahaross, the composer of spiritual peace music which could pacify even the Warlords of Kaa, which would have produced the man who discovered the benign parasitic enzyme that would convert superfluous human fat into transmittable energy to power portable computers and music players...'

Duotheros seemed bent on an eternal litany of the future benefits to universal peace and prosperity that Byxor would have provided but for its untimely and pointless destruction.

The Doctor coughed gently.

'Ahem.'

'What?'

'Well I could, of course, go back a little further and apply a little, er,

well shall we say... trouser adjustment. That is of course if the Time Lords approved such a minor intervention. And after all you have only just discovered the disappearance of Byxor. So the Matrix nexus hasn't yet been imprinted. Er, has it?' He smiled winningly and casually buffed the black and white image of a cat that adorned his gaudy lapel.

Duotheros stared at the Doctor again. But this time something was flickering at the back of the academic's mind. A battle was taking place.

'Strictly, of course...' he began.

'Yes, of course, strictly...' the Doctor helpfully agreed. 'However given the time frame...'

'Yes, the time frame is definitely...'

'Definitely...'

'And the undoubted benefit to all future, erm...'

'Civilisations?' the Doctor offered.

'Yes. The undoubted benefit to all future civilisations - everywhere.'

They looked at each other.

The Doctor left.

He returned to Byxor.

This time he discovered why the trousers had been imperfectly made. It was a somewhat sobering discovery and one that made the Doctor instantly promise himself never to do a favour for an old friend again. The girl stitching the trousers had been distracted by the sight of a blue Police Box suddenly appearing, with a series of grating *vworps*, outside her window.

She had witnessed the Doctor's earlier visit to investigate the untimely end of Byxor. It was therefore that very visit that had resulted in the annihilation of the planet that he thought he had come to save.

Now the Doctor had no compunction. He took the TARDIS to a point around the corner from Acme Trousers, some thirty years earlier, and planted a quick growing evergreen tree at the point where it would completely obscure his 'future' distracting visit from the gaze of the careless trouser maker.

As he returned to the TARDIS feeling somewhat self-congratulatory about the simplicity of his remedial action, he glanced up and saw that

he had materialised the TARDIS immediately outside the Zenith Brassiere Company. A sea of faces watched him from its windows, as he re-entered and went on his way back to report to Duotheros.

No, he told himself, the lightening of ineptitude really can't strike twice. Can it?

Then came the next imponderable. Would Duotheros now remember that he had asked the Doctor to help in the first place? If the plan had worked, then the time lines would have shimmered, shifted and the imperfections would fade taking with them the memory of their existence. Only the Doctor would carry the memory of both lines. Duotheros had not experienced both and would therefore now have no memory of the whole anomaly.

The Doctor was therefore not surprised, when Duotheros greeted him affably as an old friend not seen for some time. 'Doctor, my dear fellow! How are you? What have you been up to? Not tampering again I hope...'

Old Scores

BRET HERHOLZ

It felt like ages since he'd left the party. The sun had set nearly four hours before, as he drove his bright yellow Edwardian roadster, so affectionately named *Bessie,* down the long expanse of road.

Despite the bitter cold autumn air biting at his face, he always insisted on leaving the top down on the old car. Force of habit, most likely. Besides, he'd been on colder worlds before, and the tartan jacket and black gloves he was wearing was protection enough from the elements.

He hated leaving the party the way he did, but he didn't want to spoil what was suppose to be the happiest moment in Jo Grant's young life. She was, after all, marrying the environmentalist chap from the Nuthutch. Jones. The man who had taken Jo away from him.

As happy as he wanted to be for his young friend, he couldn't help his feelings. Jo had been his companion, and moreover his friend, for nearly three years.

He had, sometimes without much choice of his own, shown her the universe. Taken her to see places and creatures beyond her wildest dreams. Now she was willing to give that all up to spend the rest of her life on Earth.

Stop being so silly, he thought to himself as his long mane of white curly hair blew in the breeze. *This is for the best, and you know it. Now stop thinking about it and focus on your driving.* Which he did.

He looked up as his car roared passed a sign that read **Devil's End Welcomes You**. He smiled tightly as he read the sign.

Welcomes you, he thought sarcastically. Being tied to a May pole by several possessed villagers in a sacrifice to an alien they believe is Satan is not a very inviting thought.

But it wasn't their fault, he thought to himself as he continued his drive through the quiet village. They were not thinking on their own accord and he had to constantly remind himself of that.

There was not a single sign of life in the village. The people had most likely gone to sleep hours ago. There was almost something serene and perhaps even beautiful about Devil's End.

A small village barely touched by the hand of time giving tourist and passers-by a glimpse of yesteryear with old unpaved roads and quaint taverns. These are things one doesn't notice when saving the universe.

He brought his yellow roadster to a screeching halt as he had finally reached his destination. Devil's Hump. Aptly named for what he went through the last time he was here. On the site a group of archaeologists had discovered a cave inside the large hump that they believed contained an old crypt.

It turned out to be an alien ship and what they found inside was a thirty-foot tall creature they believed to be Satan, but was just as alien as the ship in which it had crash-landed on Earth.

It always seems to turn out that way.

As he forced the gear lever of the outdated vehicle into neutral, he looked up to see the person whom he was suppose to meet had already arrived.

The short man dressed in all black attire with a neatly trimmed goatee was sitting at a small round wooden table with two ornate looking cushioned chairs on each side. Across from the man was a porcelain tea set complete with cups and a pot full of steaming hot tea.

In the middle of the table was an antique wooden chessboard complete with white and black chess pieces. The pieces themselves looked as through they were painstakingly carved from ivory. A large grandfather clock sat next to the man in black, who was hunched over the chessboard trying to make it look as through he has been waiting there a long time, studying the game.

All for show, the Doctor thought smugly to himself, studying his dark clothed "friend's" elaborate set up. He hopped out of the yellow car and made his way towards the table.

The man in black looked up from the game to see the tall white haired gentlemen making his way over. The shoulder capes on his "friend's" tartan jacket were blowing in the breeze. The man in black looked pleased as he got up to greet him. The act was so good, he

almost wanted to believe it.

'You've arrived!' he said happily clasping his gloved hands together.

'Naturally. I got your message,' the Doctor said, taking a small electronic device out of his jacket pocket and displaying it in clear sight. 'Though I have to say I'm quite surprised. I would have thought your last blunder would have done you in for good.'

'You *know* I could never give you that pleasure.' He smiled, straightening his black gloves.

'No. I suppose not.' The Doctor rubbed his chin with his free hand, looking over at the grandfather clock. 'Another TARDIS, I see. And stolen I would imagine.'

'Nevertheless, I see you decided to rely on something a little more antiquated for your transportation, Doctor.' His opponent glanced at Bessie. 'Which would explain the lateness of your arrival.'

'I suppose I've never been a *master* at arriving early.' The Doctor smiled sarcastically.

Master. The title his black-clad nemesis seemed to relish himself. Never ceasing his attempts to show his superiority over the Doctor. He even had his TARDIS take the form of a clock -- as if to show his mastery of time.

If he truly was a Master, the Doctor had presumed, as he thought himself to be, why did he keep losing?

The Master put his arms behind his back, chuckling at the Doctor's childish remark. 'Yes, quite.' He smiled, baring his straight, stubby teeth. His face brightened as he gestured the Doctor towards the chessboard.

'After you, Doctor?' the Master said, bowing cordially.

'Oh, I wouldn't dream of it.' The Doctor gave him a tight smile. shoving the electronic device back into his jacket pocket. 'After you.'

The Master was bemused by the Doctor's remark as he led him towards the chessboard. The Doctor sat down, pushing the shoulder capes on his jacket back, as the Master followed suit.

'Tea?' the Master asked, picking up the decorative teapot.

'If you would be so kind,' the Doctor said with feigned sincerity, studying the chessboard intently.

The Master poured the steaming contents of the teapot into the small Victorian cups and, placing them delicately on saucers, he handed a hot cup over to the Doctor who took it without looking up.

The Master then took his own cup of tea and sat down. He took a sip of the tea and began to study his next move.

'It's been a long time, hasn't it Doctor?' the Master said, moving his rook across the board. There was a hint of nostalgia in his voice that took the Doctor off guard.

'Five hundred years, to be exact.' The Doctor moved his knight.

They had begun this game when they were both still in their first year at Prydonian Academy. Both young, both in their first regeneration, both still the best of friends. Before *that* day. It made the Doctor's hearts ache to think about it.

'Of course the Brigadier wouldn't understand,' the Master smirked, as he made a move with his bishop that captured the Doctor's knight. 'I mean, you and I, meeting like this...'

'There are many things Lethbridge-Stewart doesn't understand,' the Doctor said passively, 'but what I do is none of his business.'

'And Miss Grant?' *Touché.*

The Doctor gave him an icy look. Whether he somehow knew about Jo's sudden departure, or he was just merely inquiring, was irrelevant. He didn't want to be reminded that Jo had left him.

The Master smiled, raising his eyebrows. 'A touchy subject, perhaps.' He levelled his eyes once again at the board.

The Doctor picked up his cup and took a small sip. He found a weakness in the Master's bishop and moved his rook in for the kill.

'Rook takes Bishop,' the Doctor announced as snatched up the Master's bishop, placing it with the rest of the black chess pieces imprisoned from their early game.

'I must congratulate you, Doctor,' the Master said as his eyes brightened, 'but you've committed a small error.' He took up his knight and captured the Doctor's rook.

The Doctor looked genuinely impressed, as much as he could against his old foe.

'I anticipated that you would make that move and I thought the best

way to win your trust was to sacrifice my bishop.'

'Of course, but then again, you've botched up sacrifices in the past.' The Doctor showed a faint smile.

'So you haven't forgotten our last meeting here?' The Master looked over his shoulder, at the caved in hole where the hump containing the ancient spacecraft used to be.

'Not even if I tried.'

'The Great Azal: last of the Daemons,' the Master snorted to himself, 'I told the arrogant fool what he wanted to hear so I could get what I wanted.' He countered the Doctor's bishop with his knight.

The Doctor retaliated - removing the Master's knight with his second knight.

'And yet you still failed.'

'A mere setback.' He paused. 'But I always seem to come back better than before.'

The Doctor studied the game board. He had sacrificed his queen nearly a century ago; all he had left were two pawns and his King. The Master, no doubt, was amused by this.

'Always a pawn in the greater scheme of creation, Doctor,' he said, smiling triumphantly as he knocked out one of the Doctor's remaining pawns.

The Doctor hated the thought of the Master winning, even if it was just a game. He was evil... evil should never triumph. A time honored axiom, yet always true. It didn't matter where he moved now. The Master could easily pinion his King now and win the game.

Then he saw it.

The final gambit.

He studied the chessboard, and noticed the pawn's proximity to the Master's king. Why hadn't either of them taken notice of this sooner? he wondered. He studied the Master's face, saw the look of cold calculation, and realized that the Master hadn't come to the conclusion. Had the Master deliberately lost the game?

No. Perhaps they'd been playing this game so long, they'd forgotten the little things.

Both too busy trying to study the big picture.

He thought of Jo. A fragment of the big picture. The Doctor smiled

as he thought of her.

'Checkmate.' The Doctor pointed toward the winning move. His hand glided over the board as he moved his pawn, imprisoning the Master's king.

'You see, old chap, perhaps I am just a pawn.' He smiled, grabbed his coat and rose from the table. This was not the time for conflict, he thought to himself; there would be other moments, other victories, other opportunities for the two adversaries to meet on the battleground. Yet he savored the end of this particular challenge. 'But I always win in the end.'

He smiled as he held the pawn between his thumb and forefinger, then placed it on the table and, to the Master's silent surprise, walked away.

A Stone of the Heart

ERIN & JAMES BOW

'Once upon a time, the people of Kir-Milan were like cats. They lived only a little while, and then they died.'

'Is this a true story?' asked Osshe, sceptical.

'It is. But it happened a long time ago.'

'They died? Like cats?'

'Like all animals. But the people of Kir-ithnan didn't want to die. And they were very clever people. They learned to hold the tiniest parts of themselves very still, so that Death could not see them.'

'Did it work?'

In the last days of Osshe, the one-thousand, five-hundred and thirty-second Selah of the line, a magician came to Kir-ithnan, the Court Changeless.

Osshe was having tea with her grandmama when the demons dragged the man past the door, down the hall outside her sitting room. His boot heels and the demon's armour clattered like the kitchen people doing dishes. Osshe had never seen anyone struggle, and she got up smoothly from her cushion and came to the door. The statue she was dining with did not move.

'Hold,' she said.

The demons stopped, looking at her with their blank and glittery eyes.

A man dressed in black twisted free. His elbows were tied together behind him. He fell, got up. His eyes flashed at her an instant, then he knelt and cast his gaze down. His hair was cut short, neither shorn like the kitchen people's, nor long like the courtiers', the only two styles she had seen. It was a browny-black, traced with white as if salt spray had dried in it. His bow was neither humble nor terrified.

A woman walked around the demons, her stiff silks hissing. She inclined her head fractionally at Osshe and pushed the stranger into a

deeper kowtow. 'An intruder, Selah. Caught in the laboratory. The matter is in hand.'

'An intruder, Kishon?' repeated Osshe. 'Not of the Court?'

'That is what I meant by "intruder," Selah Osshe,' Kishon's eyes rode the edge of meeting Osshe's. 'Resume,' she snapped. The demons stirred, lifting their knuckles from the floor, their armour rattling.

'Override,' said Osshe. One of the demons made a small, unhappy sound in its confusion, shifting on its great flat feet, but Osshe ignored this. She stepped towards the stranger. 'What is your name?'

'I have nothing but what you give me,' he said. Daring, he looked up and into her eyes.

'The matter is in hand, Osshe,' repeated Kishon.

'Selah Osshe. You have to call me Selah,' said Osshe. She looked back at the stranger. His eyes were strange - nearly golden, like an animal's eyes, and round. 'Ephah-Etam,' she decided. 'Blackbird.'

'Carrion crow,' said Kishon.

'Selah Osshe,' he said. 'You give me my name. Give me my life.'

'Selah,' said Kishon, her fingers tight and straight in the folds of her jade-green robe. 'This matter is in hand.'

'Dismiss,' said Osshe. The demons bowed as much as their stooped bodies could, then shuffled down the hallway. Their painted armour gleamed in the torchlight, the points of the shoulders swaying from side to side as they walked. 'Unbind him,' Osshe said.

'Selah,' said Kishon, again, her fingers twisting. Osshe looked at her and she obeyed, pulling a little knife from somewhere in her robes. The stranger gasped in air and fell forward onto his hands.

Osshe said, 'I give you your life.'

'Thank you, Selah,' he said, and sat up.

'Selah Osshe,' said Kishon, 'He has seen too much to leave.'

'You will find him a place here,' Osshe said. 'What can you do, Blackbird?'

'I am a scientist,' the stranger replied, his gaze level.

'A what?' She frowned at him. 'I am divine. You must not look at me.'

He bowed his head. 'A scientist, Selah.'

'*Harasha*,' Kishon translated. 'A... magician.'

'A jester?' said Osshe.

He blinked. There was nothing the least clownish about him. Even with his arms pinned, he had been delicately dangerous, like a sword master. 'Yes, Selah,' he said. 'I can be a jester.'

'Good,' she said, and turned from them.

'Selah Osshe,' he called after her.

Kishon cuffed him across the face, her nails leaving long red trails.

Osshe turned back. 'Yes, jester?'

'A riddle from your jester: why can't you see your eyes?'

Kishon watched Osshe walk through the wall. The sealfield flickered like a candle over the grey stones of the corridor. Water dripped from the ceiling and plinked into a kettle set on the floor. 'Bolt,' said Kishon, 'and I'll have you killed.'

The man named Blackbird pulled his hand away from his scratches and made a suave, bloody shrug with it. 'Better know the answer to the riddle, then.'

Osshe knelt before the statue which was enshrined in her room. She was supposed to be looking down, but she was looking up, at the statue. It was of a girl not much older than she, dressed in the elaborate robes of a Selah. The stone was kneeling as Osshe was supposed to be kneeling, with perfect calm, her hands on her knees, her face downturned. Every detail of the statue was perfect, from the embroidered genetic codes of the outer robe to the long separate eyelashes. 'Pekah,' she said. 'Why can't I see my eyes?'

'You have no mirror, Osshe,' said Pekah. She paused from clearing the tea things and knelt before the child. She widened her warm eyes. 'See them now?'

'Two of me,' Osshe giggled. Then she pushed past Pekah and climbed onto the statue's pedestal. She poked the statue-girl in the cheek where the jade - so pure it was nearly white - seemed to blush a dappled green. 'I mean my grandmama. She was me.'

'Many selves ago, Osshe,' Pekah replied. 'Come get dressed now. There's a pilgrimage coming to see you.'

'So why can't I see her eyes?' Osshe peered close at the statue's

face. Between the lashes, the statue-girl's eyes were smooth as eggs.

'You are too big to climb around like a little monkey,' said Pekah, lifting her down and carrying her, squealing, across to her bed. She drew the screen closed around the shrine. 'And you are too old to call her grandmama. You understand what you are.'

'The Selah.'

'Who passes into the stone. Who carries the whole world's death from life to life.'

'Why do you look at me? No one else can look at me.'

'How could I get you dressed if I couldn't look at you, Osshe? I'd polish the hair off your head.'

Osshe giggled and shucked her common robes. 'You'd polish my eyebrows off. You'd polish my nose off!'

'You'd be a funny-looking statue then!' Pekah put a dot of the polish on the end of her nose. The cream spread out, covering the tiny wrinkles and pores until Osshe's skin was smooth as polished stone.

The pilgrims were from the guild of roadwalkers, who tended the lightingbug globes and shovelled gravel into the bogholes on the long roads. They smelled of lightingbug pheromones and brackish bogwater. The silk banners of their guild hung limp on their poles.

Osshe knelt, her hands on her knees and her face modestly downturned, still as a statue among the statues in the courtyard of the Court Changeless - the heart of the heart of the world, through which the axis of the planet passed. The place was called the Garden of the Chosen, though nothing grew there except the sleeping roses - white flowers with open blossoms as big as a child's face. Their tangled briars made a soft, high mound of the toppled outer walls.

For nearly an hour, no one had moved. The polar sun threw the shadows of the statues and the pilgrims across the subtle waves of stones. The pilgrims shifted restlessly, and lightingbugs flapped around their reverent hands. Osshe let only her eyes move. With the polish on her skin and the colourfield over her, she could not be told from the statues kneeling in the courtyard.

Or the workers could not tell. Kishon, who knew the pattern of the statues, cast sharp glances toward her, and Blackbird, unseen in the shadow of one toppled wall, was looking right at her.

At last Kishon stood and climbed the dais in the centre of the courtyard.

The workers stirred in relief. A few rose and brought forward their offering of food and hand-tools, a new colony of lightingbugs in a murmuring box.

'For your lives you are indebted,' said Kishon, 'and by this gift you make a payment. In the name of the Selah, I thank you.'

'The Selah,' the pilgrims echoed. Osshe stood. The colourfield fell away from her, but the living moonglow colour of her skin was made strange by its stony polish. And strange, too, was her walk. She walked as a statue might walk, slowly, holding points of balance far longer than looked possible. She hoped someone might touch her - a sewing woman had reached, just last month, to brush the hem of her robe. But today the walker nearest her leaned away, making a warding sign inside his praying hands. Osshe climbed the dais and knelt back down in front of Kishon. 'For your lives you are indebted,' she said. Her lips barely moved. 'But the debt is not recalled. You are welcome. Go in peace.'

The pilgrims stood, groaning. They milled around. Kitchen people appeared, bearing tea and drugs in tiny jade cups. The walkers circled,

some leaving offerings for particular statues. (The offerings, Osshe knew, were claimed by cats and rats.) A few climbed the dais shyly, laying fruit and even a bag of sweets before her. The polar shadows had stretched across the garden of the chosen by the time the pilgrimage came together beneath its banners and walked out the gap in the wall that was the gate of the Court Changeless.

When they were out of sight, Osshe pocketed the sweets. Kishon snapped her forgers, bringing garden people to rake the stones, fetchers to furl the flags, kitchen people to clear the cups, and Pekah to handle Osshe.

'Why do I have to accept all of their offerings?' Osshe asked.

'You are the Selah,' Pekah replied. 'It is because of you that they have their long life.'

'But it is boring,' Osshe said, with the seriousness only a child can manage. 'I hate it. May I see my Blackbird, now?'

Pekah's face tightened. She kept herself out of Osshe's view. 'Are you sure that is wise, Selah Osshe?'

'He is my jester,' said Osshe. 'I will see him.'

Pekah hesitated, but Kishon's sharp eyes picked Ephah-Etam out of the shadows. Her glare pinned him like a lance, but a smile was the only indication he gave of having seen her. He walked to the foot of the steps and kowtowed before the demons forced him to. He got to his feet and kept his gaze just out of eye-contact.

Most of the court people wore simple robes in the colours of jade - creamy greens, pinks, and yellows. He wore a black robe of slightly foreign style over his alien clothes, embroidered over with black thread patterned like feathers. Red and yellow thread-feathers capped his shoulders. The scratches on his face had not healed.

'Where did you get your robe?' said Osshe. 'Did you make it by magic?'

'I have a magic box,' he said. 'Bigger on the inside than the outside, and full of wonderful things. I can take you to see it, if you wish.'

'Outside the court?' asked Osshe.

'The Selah belongs in Kir-ithnan,' said Kishon. 'Certainly you will take her nowhere.' She looked him up and down. 'Remove your gloves and...' She gestured at his shoes, at a loss for the word. 'The Court

Changeless is sacred ground. Or did you not know that?'

Etam tucked his gloves into the sash of his robe and dropped lithely to sit beside Osshe, his long legs dangling. He undid his shoelaces. 'My dear Selah,' said her Blackbird. 'How may I be of service?'

'What is the answer to the riddle you gave me?' asked Osshe.

'Ah, are you sure you want me to answer that, Selah Osshe?' asked Etam.

'What do you mean?' Osshe's eyes narrowed. 'Do you yourself not know the answer?'

'I could answer the question, yes,' Etam replied. 'But I think you already know the answer yourself. And that, Selah, is what makes the riddle worthwhile.'

Kishon took a step forward. Etam gave no indication of being aware of her movement, but quickly changed the subject. 'Selah, you have given me my life to be your jester. I assume that you did not call me here simply to answer one riddle. How else may I entertain you?'

A repair mouse had scurried out and was trying to bind two ends of the shoelaces together. Its long-fingered little hands worried at the string. Etam was watching the mouse so closely Osshe thought he might pounce. She laughed. 'You are like a cat, do you know that? Still partly wild. I think I made a mistake in calling you Blackbird, but it sounds better.' She bolted to her feet. 'Can you show me some magic?'

Etam paused, stroking his neat beard. Then he stood. Kishon tensed as he raised his hands and showed his empty palms, and then reached into the sleeve of his robe.

He pulled out a black cloth. At first, Osshe thought that it was a handkerchief, but there was too much fabric for that. Etam pulled out some more, until it was longer than a scarf, and longer still. The black cloth looped over his hand again and again, Etam kept pulling, as Osshe giggled at the sight.

Finally, he pulled out the last of the impossibly long cloth. He then began to ball it into the centre of his clenched fist, making all of it disappear. When it was all in his hand, he slapped his wrist - and was holding a black kitten with one white sock by the scruff. He set it before Osshe.

Osshe laughed, delighted, and clapped. 'Wonderful!' The kitten took two tottering steps and fell over. 'What's wrong with it?' asked Osshe. 'Is it dead? Can you bring it back to life?'

He lifted the little animal and set it in her lap. 'I took it from the roses,' he said. 'It is only sleeping.'

'You are a magician!' she exclaimed.

'I am unworthy of your praise, Selah,' said Etam, bowing low. 'I am but a single magician here, amongst many of greater facility.' Deep in his bow, he turned his head, and he looked in the eyes.

Kishon turned on her heel and left the Garden.

'What is wrong with Kishon?' Osshe asked.

'I think she's the only one who can answer that.'

'Do you speak in anything but riddles?' asked Osshe.

Etam's gaze met hers. 'I think the truth is plain for all to see. We only see riddles because we're blinder than the statues around us. Here is another riddle, Selah, to ponder alongside the first. How many must benefit to justify the suffering of one?'

Osshe knelt, frozen to the spot. Her arms were outstretched, palms down, and her head was bowed forward. For several minutes, she didn't move. Then, without warning, she broke her position, gracefully standing up, showing no sign of stiffness. She arched her head back and raised her hands slightly, palms up, offering benediction. Then she froze again.

'How am I doing?' she asked, her lips hardly moving.

'Very well, Selah.' Pekah replied. 'Be careful about your lips, though. Statues' smiles are very prim; their tongues should never flap in the wind.'

Osshe giggled. Her body shuddered once, and then she brought it under control. 'How is Blackbird? I wish to see him again after these exercises are done.'

For a moment, there was silence. Then came the reply: 'I don't think you should associate with this stranger as often as you're doing.'

'I am the Selah. I am Divine,' said Osshe. 'You cannot deny my wishes.'

Pekah looked away. 'That is true, Selah.'

'And, yet, you wouldn't allow the demons to let me leave this place.' said Osshe.

'You were younger then,' said Pekah. 'You didn't understand your station. We had to protect you from your own childish ways.'

'Am I being childish, now?' asked Osshe.

Pekah didn't reply.

Osshe turned her head towards Pekah, adding a daring twist to her stance. She froze again, hardly blinking as she stared at her courtier. 'Speak,' she prompted. Her lips hardly moved.

Pekah hesitated. Finally, she said, 'We do not know why this stranger is here. He is not one of us. We can't trust him.'

'For what purpose could this stranger be here?' asked Osshe. 'There is nothing he can steal, and the demons will ensure that he does no harm.'

'But you are the Selah,' said Pekah. 'You are the only reason he could be here.'

'Everyone who comes here comes to see me.'

Pekah's frown hardened with frustration. For a while, no one said anything.

Osshe moved her head slightly, cocking it to one side and fixing Pekah with a stern glare. In this statue form, she said, 'Summon him.'

Pekah turned and nodded to the demons, who left the room.

Minutes later, Etam returned, with his charming smile and his calculating eyes. They blinked in astonishment as he came upon Osshe, still standing motionless in a position that he knew he couldn't maintain for nearly as long. It was the first time Osshe had seen him surprised.

'Selah Osshe,' he said, finally. 'What are you doing?'

'Practicing,' said Osshe, with the ability of a ventriloquist.

Etam opened his mouth and took breath to speak. Then he stood speechless for a moment before closing his mouth again.

Pekah watched him closely.

Osshe stepped from her position, with the suddenness of a statue coming to life. 'I'm done.'

'Ah,' said Etam, now composed. 'For what have you summoned me, Selah?'

'Your first riddle,' she said. She paused to consider before saying, 'I can not see my eyes because I am looking out from them. I could look into a mirror, but I would not see my eyes, only their reflection. I can not see what I am seeing with. Is that the answer?'

Etam raised his eyebrows. 'Yes, that's one of the possible answers. We can not see the truth that we are a part of.'

'One of the answers?' asked Osshe. 'What are the others?'

'Perhaps you will discover them yourself someday, Selah. Is there anything else?'

Osshe went over to a table and from beneath it, pulled out a hexagonal checkerboard with nine hexagons on each side. Onto the board, she poured out a box full of jade and amber pieces, some resembling rooks, some resembling knights and others resembling more modern implements of war. 'I want you to play Candace-Medan with me, Blackbird.'

'Ah,' said Etam. 'I fear that I have never played this before. I've played something similar; I think perhaps a predecessor of this game, but I don't know the rules to Candace-Medan.'

Etam watched as Osshe explained how each piece moved and how they captured other pieces. Then she set up the pieces on the board, and the two played a practice game. By the time it was over, the stranger was ready. They set up the pieces again, and Osshe moved first.

As the play progressed, and the strategies developed, Etam would often look up, studying Osshe, plotting his next moves outside of the game. Osshe's attention was fully fixed on the game board.

'Have you played long?' asked Etam.

'Kishon taught me when I was six,' Osshe replied.

'Have you been at the court that long?'

'I have been Selah all this life,' Osshe replied matter-of-factly, 'and I was found very young. In a city called Ush. I like to play, but Kishon never has time, and Pekah doesn't understand the rules.'

'Are you not... lonely? ... bored? Do you miss your family?'

'I am the Selah,' Osshe replied. 'I have no family.'

'But-'

'Candace-Enos,' said Osshe, toppling Etam's amber queen with her

rook. 'You have fallen.'

Etam blinked and peered at the board. He hadn't even seen the beginnings of the attack that had slipped past his defence and brought him down. He calculated the strategies behind Osshe's moves, and raised an eyebrow at the strength of them. 'Brilliant.'

He leaned forward and set up the pieces again. This time, he paid his full attention to the board. The game took longer. Osshe paused to consider her moves at times but, in the end, she brought forward her squadron leader triumphantly and toppled the amber queen.

'Candace-Enos,' she said with a giggle. 'You have fallen.'

The stranger sat back in his chair in shock. Osshe had punctured his carefully crafted defences and moved in for the kill. When he ran over Osshe's moves and calculated the strategy behind him, the numbers in his head danced. 'Brilliant,' he muttered again.

He leaned forward and set up the pieces one more time. 'Osshe, would you be interested in something more challenging?'

Osshe perked up.

Etam placed the pieces on the board in a mid-game setup. 'From this position, could you make Candace-Enos in...' he thought a moment, 'twenty moves?'

Osshe peered at the board. Then a smile crept over her face and she wagged her head affirmative.

'You move first,' said Etam.

Osshe moved.

Etam countered. 'One,' he said.

They moved again, jade pushing forward, amber pulling back. 'Two,' said Etam.

The game progressed. Osshe's forces surrounded the stranger's, who had pulled back into an impenetrable shell. Each time, the stranger called out the number of moves made. 'Nine,' he said.

Osshe moved. Etam counter-moved. 'Ten.'

'Candace-Enos,' said Osshe, toppling the amber queen with her general. 'You have fallen.'

The stranger sat back in his seat, his eyes wide. 'My word,' he breathed.

Osshe sat back, a satisfied smile on her face. 'You play well. You

may go, now. In two hours' time, you shall have tea with me and grandmama.'

The stranger took a moment to hear her. 'I see,' he said, finally, standing up. He walked in a daze as Pekah led him into the arms of the lacquered demons, which took him away. Pekah nodded respectfully at Osshe, and then followed the prisoner.

The kitten purred as Osshe gently tickled it under its chin. She held it in her lap when Etam was brought into the room.

The stranger bowed low. 'I must say, you humble me with your abilities at Candace-Medan, Selah Osshe. I hope we may play again soon sometime.'

'Maybe,' Osshe replied. 'But first, we shall have tea. Sit.' She indicated a cushion across a table between them, loaded with tea things.

In her arms, the cat hissed and spat, and the stranger stood back. Osshe stared at the cat, perplexed. 'Gispa!' She had to lunge to grab the cat before it sprang. She held it tightly while it twisted to sink its milk teeth into Etam.

'Pekah!' Osshe called. Her courtier stepped forward and Osshe placed the spitting cat in her arms. 'Take him away.'

'I thought you were like a cat - but the cat does not like you.' Osshe grinned at the pun.

Etam chuckled. 'The thing to remember about cats, my dear Selah, is that they are only pretending to be tame. They... understand the benefits of the situation. But at heart, they are solitary.'

Etam knelt, carefully, across from Osshe. Pekah returned and poured out the tea. After first taking a sip herself, she nodded at Osshe, and the meal began.

As they ate, Etam looked around, curious. Finally, he said, 'May I ask you something, Selah?'

'What, Blackbird?'

'You said that we would be having tea with your grandmother. Is she here?'

'Yes,' Osshe replied. 'She is here.'

'Is she Pekah?' he asked, perplexed.

'No!' Osshe laughed. 'She is to your right.'

Etam looked to his right. 'This statue is your grandmother?' he said.

'I call her that,' said Osshe. 'But she is really me.'

'She is you?' he repeated.

'All of the statues are me. I am the Selah. I carry my people's mortality from life to life.'

'As every one of us knows,' said Pekah.

'But, Pekah, I never claimed to be one of you.' Etam poured tea delicately and offered the maid a cup.

The motion bared his outstretched arm.

Pekah reached out and took Etam's hand before he could pull it back. She pushed up the sleeve. The stranger's skin was flaking above the wrist. It looked like long-fallen leaves, falling apart.

'What is it?' said Osshe.

Etam pulled his hand away and his sleeve down. 'I'm ill,' he replied, his gaze dropping further from her eyes.

A hissing sound distracted Osshe's attention. She looked to the floor, and saw that the kitten had crossed the room to them and was glaring at Etam. It hissed, and lunged, claws catching at Etam's wrist. The jester cried out. Osshe grabbed at the cat, and shouted as the claws drew red trails on the back of her hand.

The demons and Pekah moved forward immediately, knocking the cat away, and tending to Osshe. Osshe was trying to keep the demons from killing the cat. The stranger sat, forgotten.

He stared down at the floor where two droplets of blood lay. One of them was his. The other changed colour before his eyes. going from red to a dappled green within seconds. Etam picked up the green blob, which had now solidified into a lump of jade. He rolled it between his fingers.

'Ah, Kishon,' said the man called Ephah-Etam, as the chatelaine came stalking through the laboratory doors. 'I thought you'd find me. You're about five minutes late.' He wore a close-seer along one eyebrow. Kishon could see the magnified jade droplet spin on the red-veined membrane that covered his eye. He stroked the tiny creature and it curled into his palm.

'How did you get here? Did every guard forget about you?'

'Most did. It was not difficult to make the others forget. Does that surprise you?'

Kishon shook her head. 'No.'

'Does that frighten you?'

Ephah-Etam looked up and smiled like a fox, clever and predatory. 'Liar. You know what I am.'

'Why don't you admit it, yourself?'

'I am a scientist,' the stranger replied.

'Ah,' said Kishon, smiling grimly.

'Let us talk, as one scientist to another.' He barked with laughter to match his smile. 'You ought to see your face, Kishon. Hearing the word - you see the ghost of the friend you murdered. I've read your papers.'

'Papers.'

'Yes. I found the earliest ones unindexed in the humanspace archives, forgotten as the unremembered dead. Forgotten as the colony that cut itself off to keep its secret. So I found the colony. Found the next set of papers. Found how you rewrote the cellular aging mechanism. The Juhtah. The stretching. The retroviruses you used to do the recoding. The Secacah Syndrome - children becoming stone at puberty. The phenotypic marker was yours, I think.' He tapped at the corner of his eye with a decaying finger. 'A nice piece of genetic engineering, though some might say transparent iris was -'

'- an attribute of a god,' Kishon said.

'Ah. It *was* planned. Ruthless. Clever. We could help each other, Kishon. You see, I'm a student of immortality. Though a mere dilettante in the presence of a master like yourself.' He showed his teeth to tell her she'd missed a joke. 'Mine is a - personal interest.'

'You're dying.'

Etam clapped his hands together and threw the resulting skin into the air like a magician. 'Horribly,' he said, and grinned.

'You want the secret of immortality.'

'Got it in one.'

Kishon bared her teeth. 'Take it from the archive.'

'I tried. The remembering machines are insane. All immortal things

go insane eventually, I suspect. One loses too much.'

'Why should I help you?'

'To get rid of me, of course. The balance of power here is delicate, Kishon. Twenty thousand years of grief and and twenty thousand years of dead children, all held up in the arch of a pretty religion. A delicate structure. And I can be - disruptive.'

'The dead are rarely disruptive.'

'On the contrary, Kishon. The dead are powerful. Osshe is the keystone of the arch above your head. Do you not think that would - perturb her?'

'Osshe is twelve, Etam. How long can she protect you?'

His eyes flared and flickered. 'You mean she will - how do you put it? - pass into the stone?'

'No pretty words, Blackbird. She will die. And I assure you, she is no god. She will not protect you then.'

'You don't believe in the divinity of the Selah.'

'I created it. How should I believe in it?'

"Then let me take Osshe with me. Let me go.'

'You want to use her as a genetic subject. The exception that proves the rule. You will find a jade statue hard to test.'

'I can save her life.'

'It cannot be done. The Juhtah would be uncoded. The death spread to the general population.'

'Let it,' said the stranger with a shrug. 'You are twenty thousand years old, Kishon, and every year was stolen from a child like Osshe. You are a vampire. It is time for this to end.'

'It cannot end. Osshe will turn to stone. Others will follow and also turn to stone. It is the price for the life of a world. It is our greatest accomplishment. Should it be thrown away because a girl suffers?'

'The riddle again.' Slowly, he looked past her. 'Have you solved this one, Osshe?'

Kishon whirled around, and stared at Osshe in shock. She glanced back at the stranger, and glowered at his satisfied smile.

Osshe backed away, staring hard at Kishon. Then she turned and bolted for her room.

'Selah!' Kishon shouted, rushing to the door, but Osshe was out of

sight.

'I rather like being an oracle,' said Etam. 'Riddle me this, Kishon. What gods are real but the ones we make ourselves? And what do you worship but living death?'

'Riddle me this,' Kishon spat, then whistled. Two lacquered demons lurched into view. 'Kishon was not the name on those papers. Do you know what it means, Blackbird?'

In the demon's arms, Etam smiled, and selected the obscurer meaning. 'The twisted. You wanted eternal youth, but you should see your eyes.'

'It means Snarer of Birds. I've caught you. I don't have to kill you. I only have to let you die.'

'Haven't you surrounded yourself in enough death?'

'I see your eyes.' Kishon laughed bitterly. 'Have you?'

'Enough.' said the stranger. He raised his hands, surrendering to the demons, and stepped ahead of them, leaving them to follow as he walked back to his cell.

Osshe woke, and found she was blind.

'Why can't you see your eyes, Osshe?' Blackbird's voice. She tried to look toward it, but could not.

She was kneeling, still as on her most perfect days. The stillness seemed to be a skin she was wearing, the way cold can feel like gloves and stockings. She tried to make her hands shiver, just a little, not enough to draw Kishon's sharp eye, but enough to bring her skin back to her. She could not. Kishon was not there. There were no pilgrims, no courtiers, just her, trapped is the stillness that crept in from her own skin.

Osshe jerked out of bed, really awake this time. She passed her tiny, empty room, restless, aimless, touching things to prove her fingers still worked, walking to prove she could move. She stopped a moment before the shrine. The stone girl gazed quietly down at her. Shivering, Osshe pulled on her heavy outer robe, pattered out of her room and into the corridor beyond.

The Garden of the Chosen was lit only by the two moons, rising, red as wolves' eyes. Osshe could just make out each statue. The blowing,

twisting shadows of the roses danced over the intricate patterns of the stone. The garden and the frozen girls seemed to shift, restless. Osshe swallowed.

She made her way to the first statue, and pulled herself onto the plinth, bringing her level with the girl's face and eyes. Like the others, they were as smooth and as featureless as eggs. She let herself down and moved to the next statue. Though the girl knelt perfectly, her eyes were very wide, and quite blank.

Osshe wandered from statue to statue. Her step, which had been silent, began to raise a little clatter as the loose round stones shifted underfoot.

She had been in this place more times than she could count all her life. She had become so used to the statues, that she hardly saw them anymore. Now she looked at every one. Their faces, each, were as different as any set of faces might be. All girls, all about her age, all kneeling, all - She had her hair done in the style they wore, every day. She wore the robes they wore, every day. She knelt as they did, every day. She had the dream they were having -

Osshe stumbled over a wave of stone, caught herself on the rough plinth of the nearest statue. She looked up into the stone girl's eyes. Like the rest, the eyes had no retina or pupil. The girl was staring forward with her hand on her chest, and her mouth open as if to speak. Osshe reached up, and eased her forgers into the open mouth. The fingertips ran along the perfect set of teeth, the bumps of the gum-line, and over and under the solid tongue, raised as if the girl was caught at the last, taking a final breath.

She took her hand out, spooked by the sudden thought that the mouth could close on her hand.

The tunic of the statue was crafted in loving detail, right down to a slight part between the buttons, where the fabric had been stretched. Osshe poked her fingers inside, and ran them along the girl's stomach. Hidden from view was the belly button.

Osshe pulled her hand from the tunic, and stepped back.

She smelled the rotten-sweet lightingbug pheromones and she jerked to hide - but the bugs' soft bodies had already made a glow-green ring in the air. At the centre of the cone stood Blackbird.

'Kishon keeps you under guard,' said Osshe. Her voice creaked a little, for her mouth was dry.

'I chose to escape,' replied the stranger. 'Does that surprise you?'

'No,' she said.

'Does that frighten you?'

Osshe took a step away from the statue. 'No,' she said.

'It should.'

'But it doesn't,' Osshe replied. 'Why are you here?'

The stranger paused. For a moment, the red shadows shifted weirdly over his still, careful face. Finally, he said, 'To tell you the truth.'

'The truth about what?'

'You. This place. Everything. Even me.'

'What about you?' asked Osshe.

He paused again. 'I am...' he stumbled. 'I am known as...' He straightened himself up, and looked away from her gaze. 'I call myself the Master.'

'The master of what?' Osshe said.

His chuckle was brief. 'At the moment, very little.'

'That tells me very little.'

'But that is the truth about me,' the Master replied.

'And the truth about me?'

The Master paused. She noticed that he was holding his arm, the one that was flaking and mottled, gingerly, as though it hurt, but had done so for so long that the gesture was an empty habit. 'You don't have to die.'

'I have not died. I have passed from life to life, carrying my people's mortality.'

'I think you know that's not true,' the Master cut in. 'You are a little girl affected by a syndrome. You heard Kishon say so herself.'

'I don't believe her. And I don't believe you. I am the Selah. That is the truth.'

'Let me show you the truth,' said the Master.

He stepped up to her and she stepped back against the statue's base, then frowned, leaning forward as he knelt in front of her, not in homage, but searching for something in the ground.

'It took me some time to find this,' he said. 'I knew it had to be here, and after I thought about it, I knew where it had to be. But still, it took - ah, here!' he said, and rose, holding in his hand one of the stones. It seemed quite ordinary to her, except that it was round as a moon. As he held it, it began to glow.

'What are you doing?' she said. 'Is it magic?'

'Yes,' he said. 'It's necromancy.'

And as he spoke, the ground gave way under them, stretching down like a rubber sheet till they stood on the floor of a cavern. A little light trickled down the sides of the funnel of loose stone that the patch of garden had become.

The Master dropped the stone he'd picked up. The click of its fall echoed around them, and the ground slipped up.

Osshe knew it was only a sealfield, but it was hard not to trust her eyes, which said that the stones were swallowing them up. When it reached her neck she tilted her head up and closed her eyes. The sealfield ran up her face and to the end of her nose - it felt just like walking into a room. She opened her eyes. With the illusion of ground above them, it was entirely dark.

'Wait,' said the Master. He snapped his pheromone rod in half and threw the pieces whirling through the air. The lightingbugs swarmed, filling the room with crawling light.

Osshe gasped. It was no wonder why the room sounded as big as the Garden of the Chosen; it was its mirror image. She was standing on the same type of steps leading to the same dais upon which she received visitors in the courtyard. The cave was the same length and breadth, and had a floor of the same ripples of stones, the same subtle pattern of statues. But the statues were very different.

Osshe gasped again, in horror, at the first statue she saw. It was of a girl, the same age as she, frozen with her body contorted, arms fending off invisible monsters, her mouth open in a scream.

Osshe backed away in shock. She bumped into a jade arm and whirled around.

The Master watched with folded arms and tightened eyes.

The statue-girl was looking at her fingers and screaming.

Osshe recoiled and tripped over a statue of a girl throwing her body

against an invisible wall. Her hands were clawing at it, and the first joints of the stone fingers were missing.

'A few girls had to be locked in cages,' the Master said, 'and, afterward, their fingers struck off to remove them from the bars. Not a spot for pilgrimage, is it? Though you may notice it's kept nicely dusted.'

Osshe covered her eyes, and screamed.

The Master took two steps toward her as if hypnotized, then bounded down and swept up Osshe into his arms. He held her for a long time while she wept.

'I'm sorry,' he said at last.

'What is this place?' Osshe wailed.

'I doubt they gave it a name.' he said.

'It's lies,' Osshe sobbed. 'The Garden of Lies.'

'You are not a god,' he told her. 'And you do not have to die. I can save you, Osshe.'

'Is that why you came here? To save me?'

'Yes. You are why I came here.' The Master pulled Osshe back and looked her in the eye. 'I am dying, Osshe. And your people are immortal. I came to find the secret of your people's immortality. If I can find what makes you different from the rest, and cure you, I can cure myself of my mortality.'

'You don't want to save me,' she said. 'You want to save yourself.'

'That's not true,' he began, soft, persuasive.

'Truth! You liar!' she demanded. 'Tell me the truth.'

He began again in that silky tone. 'Of course I want to save -'

Osshe sobbed and struck at him, like a child betrayed. Her fists pounded against his chest. He fell, folding into himself and covering his head in his arms. Osshe struck at his back twice, then stopped. She listened to him struggle to get breath into his weakened body. In the dark cavern, the sound of that seemed very loud.

She knelt down next to him. The Master looked up at her, panting. 'Tell me the truth,' she said.

'Don't ask me that,' he whispered. 'Truth is nothing but a weapon to me.'

'I trust you,' she said. 'Tell me the truth.'

'I don't even know it any more.' The Master lay his hand against her hair. He hugged her body to him and she listened to the strange heartbeat flutter like a wounded bird. 'Perhaps the truth is that we can save each other. Come with me, Osshe.'

'I cannot go,' she said, desolate. 'Where would I go?'

'With me. Anywhere you want. Anywhere in the universe.' he said. 'Osshe, I don't know how much time we have.'

'Yes,' she said, dry-eyed. 'Let's go.'

He took her by the hand, they stood, and the ground picked them up. The moons above the Garden of Lies were higher, and the light a cleaner, brighter white. They were met, there, by Kishon.

'No further,' she said. She held a sleeping rose in one gloved hand. The flower was twisting back on its stem, its petals trying to burrow through the fabric of her gauntlet.

'Kishon, get out of our way,' said the Master.

Kishon snapped the rose out. The flower raised its head, scenting toward them like a snake. 'A scratch will put you to sleep. I will take you outside the wall and leave you there.' said Kishon. 'Two scratches will kill you. It is your choice.'

The Master hesitated. Then he let go of Osshe's hand.

Kishon relaxed.

The Master swung around, swinging his fist up and catching Kishon across the jaw. She screamed and fell, dropping the deadly blossom, which lay twisting on the ground. All at once he was standing over her, a small wand, magic and deadly, in his hand.

'No!' shouted Osshe.

The Master stopped, the wand aimed at Kishon, and he looked hard at Osshe's pleading eyes. Then he nodded and scooped up the rose in his gloved hand. He held Kishon steady with one hand, though she twisted like the flower. 'One, you said,' and raked the thorns across her face. Kishon's eyes closed as she slipped into sleep.

He threw the rose clear, and took Osshe's hand. 'Come on.'

They ran through the Garden towards the gap in the wall. In the centre of the gate stood Pekah.

'No further,' she said. She was not armed. She was impassable.

Osshe stepped in front of the Master. 'Pekah,' she pleaded.

'Please, Pekah, stand aside.'

'You belong in Kir-ithnan. You are the Selah. You are our life.'

'If Osshe leaves, you'll still be immortal,' said the Master.

'Silence, stranger!' Pekah snapped. 'Osshe, child - Osshe don't leave us. Stay.'

'Pekah, I saw them. I haven't been reborn. I've died. Over and over! I'll die again if I stay. Please, Pekah!'

'You have your life,' said the Master, quietly. 'Give Osshe hers.'

Pekah paused, then lowered her head. 'Go in peace, Selah.'

Osshe sobbed, running to hug her maid. 'Thank you, Pekah.'

Pekah returned the embrace. 'My child,' she said. Then her grip hardened.

'Pekah!' shouted Osshe.

Pekah dragged and twisted them both toward the roses and rubble. Osshe's sleeve brushed the face of one blossom, which struck out at the fabric. 'Blackbird!' she screamed. The tangled briars reached toward them, snapping each other's stems in their blind eagerness.

The Master wrenched Osshe from her maid's arms, flinging the child back across the rattling stones. He and Pekah fell, together, into the flowers.

The Master covered his face and rolled. The embroidered leathers of his robe snagged on thorn after thorn. He grunted as he felt one cut into his skin. 'Selah,' he gasped, climbing up through the pain and the poison. He blinked to clear his eyes, knowing he had lost time - how much?

Osshe was trying to lift Pekah, with little jerks. The woman was bound with briars. The Master dropped his ruined cloak over the almost still body and pulled Osshe away.

Osshe turned on him, staring. In his tunic and trousers, shoes gloves, he looked alien and unreachable. But he stared at Pekah's body, a little line between his eyes.

'You killed her,' Osshe wailed.

The line between his eyes deepened.

'She tried -' said Osshe. 'Will you die too?' she asked.

'No,' he said. 'Though they'll kill me when they catch me.'

Then the stars started to go out.

The Master and Osshe looked up. A black eclipse was spreading out from the zenith of the sky, eating the stars: a dome sealing off the Court.

'This way!' the Master shouted, and he half-led, half-dragged Osshe towards the gate in the crumbling wall. They ran down the path as the shimmering shield crackled down towards their heads, fifty feet above, then thirty, and then ten.

The Master threw Osshe forward to safety and then dived, rolling, under the descending wall. It sizzled into the stones next to his ear. Smelling thunderstorm and his own scorched hair, he staggered to his feet.

The two of them ran up the road while, behind them, Kir-ithnan came alive with light and sound. Through the dome, it shone like a carnival in the fog.

'Where?' asked Osshe.

'My ship,' the Master said, gasping. 'The magic box. This way.' He turned off the road by one of the light globes. There was no path to be seen, but he picked their way through the boulders and bogholes at just short of a run. Osshe kept pace with him, panting. She staggered.

The Master glanced toward her. 'Are you alright?' he asked.

She was moon pale and breathing in little gasps. 'Yes,' she said.

He turned away and Osshe started to follow. Then something caught her eye and she stopped.

Alee of one boulder stood a stunted digger pine. Once, she guessed, it had been covered by a shift of the bog, petrified, and uncovered again. Running away three years ago, she had stopped by this stone tree. It was the furthest one could go and look back to see Kir-ithnan, and it was that which had made her turn back, then. Even now, she could feel the image of the court behind her, whispering in her ear like a conscience, tugging at her shoulder, turning her head.

Osshe turned to look.

It took a moment for the Master to realize that nobody was following him. He frowned. 'Osshe?'

Across the murmuring field of reeds, Kir-ithnan glowed, strange and perfectly beautiful.

He stepped back down the path to Osshe's side. He reached out,

paused, then laid a hand on her unyielding shoulder. Osshe didn't move.

The reeds spoke to him of missed chances and death. Osshe, of course, said nothing.

The Master stared a long time at the lovely statue of a girl looking over her shoulder at the Court of Kir-ithnan. Then he looked away and returned to the path that would lead him to his TARDIS.

He did not look back.

The Last Song I'll Ever Sing

Simon Exton

The TARDIS shuddered into existence in the nighttime gloom. Even before the dust had time to settle, the door swung open and the Doctor emerged. He stood on the TARDIS threshold and aimed a dismissive *tsk*! at the night air. Satisfied that he had delivered his opinion of the planet to the Universe at large with sufficient eloquence, he stepped carefully from his ship. Behind him, his two travelling companions hurried out of the ship. All three of them began rapidly scanning their new surroundings, squinting their eyes against the dark to search out potential hiding places or traps.

Almost immediately, the young woman started to cough, violently. Seconds later, the man joined in. The Doctor sniffed at the air around them and ushered the two humans back into the safety of the TARDIS.

Once inside, Steven and Sara stopped coughing. The Doctor busied himself by scanning the dials and meters that flickered on the central console, tutting and muttering to himself as he did so.

'What's the matter, Doctor?' asked Sara, her aristocratic face frowning with concern. 'Is the atmosphere poisonous?'

'Hmm? Poisonous, you say?' he retorted, seeming to notice his companion for the first time. 'No, my dear, it's not poisonous. No, not poisonous at all. Quite clean, in fact.'

Then he turned back to the console and busied himself with the levers and switches.

'So how come we couldn't breathe, then?' asked Steven irritably.

'Couldn't you, my boy? Dear me, how unfortunate for you,' the Doctor chuckled. 'Yes indeed, how very inconvenient.'

'You know we couldn't,' Steven fumed through gritted teeth. Although he was sure the old man was only playing his absentminded act to get a rise out of his young companions, he still found himself reacting to it.

'So what was the matter with the air, Doctor?' asked Sara,

attempting to play the diplomat.

'Oh, it's just a bit dusty, that's all. Look here,' he instructed, tapping the glass of one dial with a knuckle. 'This shows a high level of metallic dust in the atmosphere.'

'Metal?'

'That's right, my dear, metal. In this case, the so-called precious metals: mainly gold and platinum, with traces of rhodium, iridium, osmium, among others. The planet seems full of them. No doubt it irritates your sinuses and makes you cough a bit, hmm?'

Now, that's an understatement if I ever heard one, thought Sara, but wisely decided not to say anything.

'So we need to find somewhere else to fight the Daleks then?' prompted Steven.

'Not a bit of it, young man. Don't make such a confounded fuss!' retorted the Doctor, swinging round to peer imperiously at the astronaut. 'This atmosphere is ideal! Doubtless its high metal content will confuse their sensors and give us the advantage we need to defeat them.'

'But Sara and I won't be able to leave the TARDIS.'

'Of course you will, my boy,' the Doctor assured them. He crossed the room, opened a small cupboard, and took out a battered cardboard box. 'Just use these.'

He handed each of the young humans a pair of white plastic nose-plugs and, while they popped them into place, he pulled a small aerosol can from the box.

'Now, just open wide,' the Doctor told them. 'One quick squirt of this at the back of the throat and you're ready to leave.'

'What is it?' asked Sara dubiously.

'An electrostatic polymer. It will filter the metal dust from the air before it can irritate your lungs. You'll be able to breathe clearly for about twelve hours and, after that, you'll just need a squirt more. Now, come along, we don't have all day, do we, hmm? Open wide,' he instructed, the sharpness of his tone leaving no room for debate.

Dutifully, they each opened their mouths to receive a tiny squirt of the spray. The cold sensation of wetness lasted only moments on the roof of the mouth, although the slight pepperminty taste took slightly

longer to fade.

'There,' the Doctor told them. 'Now we can go and scout around to make sure this is the best place to meet the Daleks. If not, we'll move on to somewhere else. Now, do come along, you two. Stop dilly-dallying.'

The dust was everywhere, thick under their feet and seemed to glisten in the weak light. Unlike normal dust, it was almost slippery and several times Steven or Sara found themselves skidding or stumbling, although neither actually ended up tumbling. By comparison, the Doctor could have been out for a stroll in the country – he hardly seemed to notice the unusual terrain. He just ambled along, occasionally giving his cane a jaunty twirl.

'Blast!' swore Steven, as he skidded forward yet again. 'What's making the ground so slippery?'

'Slippery, you say?' asked the Doctor, turning to face Steven, a knowing smile twinkling across his face. 'Hmm, yes, I suppose it is a little, my boy. Hardly surprising, is it? Hmm?'

Chuckling to himself, he turned and continued walking, as if that single comment had answered Steven's question.

'But what's doing it, Doctor? Why is it so slippery?'

'It's obvious, my boy. The dust – I told you it was made of precious metals, remember?'

'So?'

'"So"? Honestly, young man, do I have to spell it out for you? Are you incapable of even the simplest deductions, hmm?'

'It might save time if you just told us, Doctor,' said Sara, laying a controlling hand on Steven's elbow to prevent him from aggravating the Doctor further with his frustrations.

'Oh, very well, my dear,' said the Doctor with a deep sigh, which eloquently conveyed what an imposition on his precious time the explanation was. 'The dust is made of microscopic particles of uncorrodable metal. The particles slip over one another because the surfaces are so smooth there's nothing to offer resistance. As I said, simple – after all, your species has been aware of the lubricating properties of fine powders such as molybdenum oxide or graphite for

hundreds of years, you know.'

'I see,' said Steven, as he finally understood.

'Oh I'm so glad,' retorted the Doctor, his voice heavy with acidic sarcasm. 'And now that you feel suitably enlightened, perhaps we could continue our explorations, hmm? Or would you like me to explain exactly why the sky is dark just now?'

He turned and walked away before either Steven or Sara could say a word.

After only a few minutes' walk through the dusty ground, the travellers found a rubble-strewn ruin. Blocks of smashed concrete and huge, blackened sheets of metal were scattered across the landscape. Before its destruction, this had obviously been a very large building. It was now completely flattened, except for one small metal dome with a roof that tapered up to a fine point, giving it the look of a fat golden teardrop. It glinted in the faint starlight.

'Must be made of some highly polished metal,' observed Sara.

'Indeed, my dear,' the Doctor agreed. 'Gold, I should think.'

'Gold?'

'Well, why not? After all, it's easily worked, uncorrodable and there's plenty of it on this planet.'

'Do you think that's why this place was attacked?' asked Steven. 'For its gold?'

'Oh, I very much doubt it,' the Doctor told him, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

'Why not? There must be tons of gold here.'

'Yes, yes, undoubtedly there is, young man!' the old man snapped back. He turned around to glare at the young pilot. 'It's only fledgling cultures such as yours that place such a high value on the chemical elements that just happen to be missing from their own homeworld. Once you explore a reasonable amount of space, you will find that there are entire planets full of materials that you think of as scarce. After that, these things are treated as they should be: purely on the basis of their intrinsic usefulness.'

'So what about the taranium the Daleks are chasing us for?' countered Sara, pointing at the bulge in the pocket of the Doctor's

coat. 'Why can't they just find some more?'

The old man's face softened somewhat as he settled ink lecture-mode.

'Well, you see, my dear, even in a vast Universe such as this, there are certain occurrences which are incredibly rare, a combination of quantum events which may only take place once or twice in the lifetime of the entire Universe. Some of these produce stable elements with extremely high atomic weights – the 'stability island' elements that your Earth physicists have predicting for centuries. I believe taranium is one such element – and as such, we can have no real idea of its true properties. And in our possession, we may very well have the only taranium in existence. That is why we can be certain that the Daleks will follow us wherever we go, until we find a way to deal with them once and for all. I think we should continue now, don't you? Hmm?'

With that, he turned and walked away from his audience. With a sigh of resignation, Steven trudged after him, with Sara bringing up the rear, lost in her thoughts. As they walked towards the dome, a small arched doorway appeared, showing a brightly lit interior. Silhouetted in the doorway stood a tall man, beckoning them inside. Following the Doctor's lead, Steven and Sara entered the building. The doorway sealed behind them.

The interior of the dome was one large chamber, easily fifty yards in diameter. Its walls seemed to be composed of a white ceramic material, which glowed enough to light the chamber.

The man who'd ushered them inside was the room's only occupant. He was tall and obviously muscular beneath his loose silver robes. His face had a dark golden sheen and his long hair shone with the metallic lustre of copper. There were fine lines around his eyes, which were a strange silvery shade of grey, but his face and body still had the smooth, taut appearance of youth. The style of his robes and his proud, hawk-nosed profile minded the Doctor of the Arab sheikhs he'd met during a visit to a Bedouin tribe.

'A thousand greetings on your house and family,' the Doctor said in fluent Arabic.

A delighted, although somewhat confused, expression spread

across the man's face as he registered the words.

'How delightful!' he cried in English, clapping his hands together. 'A cultured visitor to my darkest hour. However, I am shamed that my knowledge of the language of my ancestors is insufficient for a proper conversation. If you wouldn't mind, kind sir, might we continue in Standard Terran?'

'By all means, sir,' the Doctor replied, switching languages with barely a missed heartbeat. 'I am the Doctor and these two young people are my travelling companions, Steven and Sara.'

The man bowed to the new arrivals before introducing himself.

'Greetings, honoured guests. I am Jamal. Welcome to the Minaret of the New Babylon Temple.'

'Temple?' asked Steven. 'Do you mean that ruin outside?'

'That ruin was a magnificent temple only yesterday,' Jamal replied with a voice full of sadness. 'It was destroyed, along with the rest of the city only a few hours ago. Now only the Minaret and I remain.'

'What happened?' asked Sara in her most sympathetic voice.

'Yesterday evening, just after sunset, the city was attacked.'

'Who by?'

'I do not know. The invaders made no demands, no threats, they just attacked. Watch.'

Jamal took a slim black control unit from his pocket and tapped in a series of instructions. The walls of the chamber faded to reveal a crystal-clear image of a beautiful city, constructed from white stone, platinum and gold. Tall, elegant towers and large open courtyards reminded the Doctor of the architecture of Jerusalem or Istanbul. The setting sun was staining the roofs with dark tones of indigo and purple. Suddenly, the sky teemed with spaceships, which systematically cut the city apart with their blazing energy weapons. No quarter was given and within minutes, the city was a sprawling mound of smoking rubble. The sight of the destruction was made more poignant by the fact that the image was utterly silent. The inhabitants could be seen, screaming for help that would never come, yet Sara could hear her breath catch in her throat as she watched the massacre. The ships orbited slowly, firing sporadically on the few survivors. The Doctor and Steven both recognised the spherical, gunmetal-grey ships.

'Sontarans,' whispered Steven, his voice filled with disgust.

The image faded, to be replaced by the simple white glow.

'Now you know why I am alone,' Jamal told them. 'My family, my friends, everyone I ever knew or cared for was in New Babylon when it was attacked. There were no survivors, only me.'

'Why did they leave this place standing?' asked Sara.

'I think the Minaret was probably shielded from their sensors by some of the technology here, but that won't stop them detecting it when it activates at dawn.'

'What will it do?'

'It was built to amplify the prayer-song of welcome to the morning sun. The singer spends the night in the Minaret in prayer, preparing for the song by fasting and meditating.'

'And you were the singer.'

'That is correct. At dawn, the Minaret will amplify my song across the city.'

'But the city isn't there any more. No-one but the Sontarans will hear.'

'Yes. I know.'

'So why not just leave? We could take you with us,' Steven suggested. 'We have a ship only a few minutes' walk from here.'

'Thank you, Steven, that is very kind, but my duty is here. Even with the listeners gone, I have a duty to the song.'

'Is a song worth dying for?'

'No,' Jamal admitted. 'But the ideal behind it is. My ancestors left Earth generations ago and subjected themselves to extensive genetic modifications to be able to tolerate the biosphere here. They did it to be able to live the life they wanted with the beliefs that meant more to them than life itself. Many of them did not survive the treatments, but they did it because they believed in what they were doing. I believe in what I am doing.'

'You're making a martyr of yourself.'

'No, I do not want to die, but I will die rather than give up what I believe in.'

'Just like Bret...' mused Steven.

At the sound of her brother's name, Sara turned her back on the

group. Steven turned to face her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.'

She turned back to face him, fresh tears shining in her eyes. Something else shone there too – a fierce pride and determination.

'You're right, Steven, Bret died protecting what he believed in, so did my husband and so did your friend Katarina. And so will I if I have to. I understand exactly what Jamal means.'

It was Steven's turn to fall silent, as he thought of the gentle Trojan girl and the brave man he'd hardly known.

In that silence, Sara's mind swam with images: the look of betrayal on Bret's face as she'd shot him down in cold blood; the last time she'd seen the man she loved before leaving for his final posting; their wedding day on her homeworld of Titan; meeting her future husband for the first time; childhood games of zero-gravity tennis with Bret...

'Thank you,' Jamal said, although the Doctor was the only one still paying full attention to the Arab. His companions were lost in their private reveries. 'I am happy that you understand my commitment. Now, there are a few minutes left before dawn. May I tell you of the family I lost?'

A tiny chime echoed through the chamber, alerting the occupants to the impending dawn. The glow of the walls faded to show the scene outside. The sky was starting to lighten as dawn began to break. Jamal turned to the three travellers, a calm and serene expression on his golden face.

'It is time for you to go, my friends,' he told them.

'Are you sure we can't persuade you to come with us?' pleaded Steven. 'It seems such a waste, throwing your life away like this.'

'I am not throwing my life away, Steven,' he told him. 'I am living true to my beliefs. That is why my ancestors left Earth in the first place. It is the reason this place was built. I must end my life as I have lived it. If I were to leave without doing that, I would have no life worth living. I hope you understand.'

'Indeed we do, sir, and we salute you for your strength of conviction,' the Doctor assured him solemnly, with a respectful nod of

the head. Then he extended his hand towards Jamal. 'I would consider it an honour to shake hands with you.'

Jamal's face split into a wide grin, revealing perfect white teeth, as he grasped the Doctor's hand and shook it enthusiastically.

'Thank you for listening to my story and that of my people. Now we will live on in your hearts.'

A second chime started to sound. Looking around, everyone could see that the night was fading and the rosy glow of dawn was spreading across the horizon.

'You must go,' urged Jamal. 'The Minaret will soon activate and you will be trapped. I have no wish to share my death with you.'

Their answer was cut short by a slight tremor that shook the building.

'Go! Now!' he yelled, taking Sara and the Doctor by the arm and propelling them towards the small doorway. 'The Minaret is activating! You must leave now!'

Sara barrelled through the door first, stumbling down a step she didn't remember and barely catching herself from sprawling onto the rubble-strewn ground. The Doctor followed immediately afterwards and she had to help him as he came through the door, or else he too would have fallen. As it was, they still skidded a few yards in the slippery dust. Looking back, she could see that the Minaret was growing and the door that had been at ground level was now over ten feet above them and moving upwards as the building extended into the sky.

As she looked up, she saw Steven's worried face appear at the door and look down.

'Jump, Steven!' urged Sara. 'Before you get too high.'

Steven took his heart in his hands and leapt into the air, landing beside the Doctor with a roll and a bone-jarring thump. He stood shakily and moved back to stand with his friends. Before them, they could see the rosy glow of the dawn shining off the golden surface of the Minaret platform. It now stretched thirty feet in the air. The upper teardrop-shaped section, where they'd sat with Jamal only moments before, began to glow and hum. The golden outer layer peeled back like a giant flower to reveal a flawless crystal dome. Standing at the centre of the crystal room was Jamal, his arms outstretched. The air

vibrated with the sound of a thousand wind-chimes, all in perfect harmony. High above them, they could just see the edges of Jamal's silver robe fluttering about him as he turned to face the rising sun.

Captivated by the sight, but still conscious of the impending attack, the Doctor started to usher Steven and Sara back towards the TARDIS. As they turned to face the sunrise, the full splendour of it astounded them. The sun was a bright golden yellow, reflected from the dust particles in the air. A million microscopic rainbows filled the air, staining it a shimmering rose. The dawn glinted with the tiny fires of an opal.

Echoing all around them, they heard the sound of Jamal's deep voice raised in ululating song. It was a song of triumph, of joy and of strength. He was singing from the very depths of his soul, filling the air with his pride in his planet, in his people, in his family.

The crystal notes of the Minaret echoed the sound across the plateau and down through the rubble-strewn streets of New Babylon.

Tears pricked at the eyes of the TARDIS crew as they heard the Arab's voice change in tempo. The song was now a slow lament, mourning what had passed. Then a new, discordant note entered the song. The high-pitched whine of a sub-orbital ship pierced the air.

From the still-lightening horizon approached the spinning sphere of a Sontaran attack-pod, an ugly dark grey stain against the beautifully scintillating sky. It hovered near the Minaret and a bolt of angry white energy lanced out and hit the Minaret. Jamal's proud baritone and the Minaret's tinkling descant were lost beneath the energetic whine of the disruptor beam. Seconds later, the sky filled with shards of white-hot glass as the Minaret shattered. The beautiful tower was reduced to a few heaps of smoking rubble.

The Doctor, Steven and Sara watched in silence until the flames died down and all that was left of the beautiful Minaret was a blackened metal tower a mere dozen yards high.

The Doctor turned to his friends and said, 'We should leave, find a place to confront the Daleks somewhere else, hmm? I think New Babylon has seen enough death for one day.'

One by one, they filed into the TARDIS and, moments later, it disappeared from the glittering surface of New Babylon.

Watch Out! Watch Out!

Mags L. Halliday

He was running late and that meant he was alone. Jim, the sub-depot manager who normally saw off the pre-dawn deliveries, had already disappeared to Tara's cafe for the daily earlybird fry-up, and the others had been leaving as he'd arrived. Terry had hurried in late, cursing his new bird's habit of wanting a little something in the morning, and started to stack the crates onto his own float.

Terry's footsteps on the slick concrete echoed back from distant corners. It was strange, he thought, how cavernous the place became when all the little electric carts had buzzed out. He attempted a whistle. They were supposed to do that, weren't they? Part of the early morning rituals of middle England, wasn't it? The chirping of birds, the thunk of *The Times* landing on doorsteps and the whistling milkman coming up the path with the two pints of silver-top in time for breakfast. Terry wasn't great at whistling though, and the half-hearted sound bounced mournfully back at him and made him stop. Just for a moment he thought he heard the tune continued but when he paused, a half-crate of gold-top in his grip, all was silent.

They warned you, when you started, about things to watch out for on your rounds. Dogs. Kids or drunken students nicking the pints off the float. Irate drivers getting stuck behind you on the dual carriageway. All bad news.

Then there was *them*.

Even as he thought the word - not the name, *never* use the name - he thought he felt something. Like someone else was in the depot with him. Like there was suddenly less empty space.

There was a clinking from behind him, where the crates of bottles were stacked, as if someone had accidentally kicked them.

'Jim? Don't mess about, mate! I'm late already. There'll be cornflakes waiting for this milk.'

A glimpse of movement, fleeting past the corner of his eye.

'Jim?'

Terry turned again and came face to face with *them*. A whole mass of *them*. Silent, watching. The crate dropped from his suddenly powerless grip. The glass shattered and milk began to pool on the cold concrete.

'Oh God...'

He tried to back away as they advanced but his boots slipped on the treacherous floor. As he fell, he felt himself start to cry with terror.

'No, please no...'

Terry's body hit the mess of broken glass and spilt milk, his weight splintering the plastic crate and forcing a heavy shard into him. The pure red blood of a major artery began to swirl into the white of the milk. Red and white. All Terry could see, as his focus began to slip, was red and white.

When their mission was complete, the Doctor wanted to celebrate. Not with those Atrians though. He was sure they wouldn't have parties where beer was quaffed, lewd songs were bellowed, or champagne was drunk from unlikely - not to mention unhygienic - receptacles. Roistering, he informed the disapproving Romana, was not in their vocabulary and he wanted he wanted a damn good roistering. If someone didn't end up in the fountain declaring their love of wine, women and song then he didn't want to be there.

'My good woman, I have never suffered so much!' Ollie was bellowing as he was led away by a different woman to the one he had arrived with the night before. 'Call this a party? Where's the damn breakfast?'

The Doctor sunk his head further into his arms, ensuring he wouldn't make eye contact with his old thespian friend. He heard Romana doing her best Lady of the Manor act.

'I'm terribly sorry, we just don't have any milk.'

'Ha!'

The Doctor heard a car's door slam and its tyres spit gravel as it roared away from the elegant house. The last guest gone.

Essential to a good party are congenial surroundings and interesting people or vice versa, so he'd delayed building the Randomiser for a

few hours, headed for one of his properties on the outskirts of London in the twentieth century and then invited all his old friends from Soho and Fitzrovia. Oliver, O'Toole and the others were never averse to a good roistering. The other essential to ensuring your party is remembered as a thing of legend is to provide an excellent breakfast. Nothing fried, in case of delicate stomachs, but at the very least there should be pancakes, scrambled eggs, waffles, fruit juice, hot buttered toast, a mix of cereals and enough tea to run the entire British Army for at least two weeks. Most, if not all, of which require the liberal use of milk. The Doctor had prepared: an extra half-crate of gold-top, two dozen eggs, a pound of butter and several cartons of orange juice had been ordered via the handy doorstep delivery of the local dairy. Dawn had arrived. The milkman had not.

'It's not too bad.' Romana remarked calmly. The Doctor cautiously raised his head and stared at her morosely.

'Bad? BAD? I'll never be able to hold a party in this era again! Not in this lifetime anyway! *And* I haven't had any cornflakes!'

Romana was being insufferably sensible at him again. 'You don't even like cornflakes.'

'That's not the point!'

She looked blankly at him. Last night she had politely ignored Jeffrey Bernard as he'd yelled 'lovely bit of posh totty' at her, made small talk with a handful of the quieter guests and retired to bed at 1am with a Jane Austen novel. She appeared to have slept well, was immaculately dressed in elegant Annie Hall style, and was clearly unaware of what a social disaster had just befallen him. He had a sudden flash of memory: at some point in the night he had bawled at her to have some fun, lighten up a little. Her icy demeanour suggested that she hadn't forgotten it. 'What is the point?' she asked.

'The point is...' he frowned in concentration, 'the point is that the milk being delivered is a constant. Regular. Banal. Humdrum routine. The stuff the British Empire was built on.' He suddenly coughed, the smoke from his dissolute friends the night before having irritated his lungs. Romana waited patiently for him to finish before asking her question.

'The British Empire was built on milk?'

'No! I mean if the milk isn't delivered, something is rotten in the state of England. Come on.'

He stood, shrugged on his jacket and purposely strode for the front door, yelling for K9 as he went.

'Doctor? Where are we going?'

'To find out where my milk is, of course!'

Earlier that morning, Mavis Watts had woken just before her alarm went off at seven a.m., as she had done for the last forty years of her life. Being over sixty was no excuse for being a slug-a-bed, as far as she was concerned. Her granddaughter, staying for the summer holidays, seemed to think eleven or even twelve was a reasonable hour to get up. Mavis made a point of leaving a cold cup of breakfast tea on the kitchen table every day, just to silently indicate her disapproval.

She heard the jaunty rattle of milk-bottles on the front doorstep as she was pulling on her red dressing gown. He was a little early this morning, she though as she came down the stairs to the kitchen. She filled the kettle and set it on the cooker to heat up. That, Mavis knew, would take three minutes. She switched the radio on, re-tuning it to Radio Six, and shuffled down the short hallway to the glazed front door to collect the post and the milk. She caught a glimpse of fluttering movement through the bottom panel, to the right of the door, where the milk was.

'Oh, those wretched birds!' Mavis muttered to herself.

Dark shapes flittered away as she undid the catch on the Chubb and by the time she had the lock itself open there was no sign of life on the secluded cul-de-sac. There were two bottles of milk on the step. The foil cap on the silver-top was ripped open; tiny jagged edges pointing upwards. A downy, yellowish feather was on the stone next to it. Mavis tutted: that was six pence wasted. She wouldn't use that pint now, not if it was contaminated by a bird's beak.

As Mavis bent carefully to retrieve the undamaged pint, she caught another flicker of movement. She glanced up, her neck aching as her old bones shifted position. She had to get that crick seen to. Then her brain finally registered what she was seeing. A bundle of red and white. She straightened, one hand clutching the undamaged bottle, the other

holding her dressing gown tight against her neck, as if quilted polyester would protect her. They seemed to follow her movement.

'Fran?' Mavis tried to shout but her voice gave out on her. 'Fran! Wake u—'

The milk bottle smashed to the ground, splattering liquid over the red dressing gown. The kettle in the kitchen started to scream as it reached boiling point.

It turned out that Oliver had, in his fit of pique, taken the Doctor's car. Undaunted, the Doctor introduced Romana to London Transport. It was two buses to the local sub-depot of the dairy. She and the Doctor had attracted attention, despite hiding K9 in a large cat-basket (to which the robot had taken offence and now appeared to be sulking in). The whole business lacked... elegance. She felt frayed.

Getting off the second bus somewhere near Richmond, the Doctor looked about and then strode off, leaving Romana struggling to get the laden cat basket off the bus. She could feel every passenger surreptitiously watching her as the vehicle slowly moved off. Looking around, she spotted the Doctor standing on a street corner, his hands in his pockets and his hat precariously perched at the back of his head.

'Come *on*!' he bellowed at her.

Romana looked at the basket. 'Well, I'm not carrying you all day,' she informed K9, kneeling down to release him.

'Thank you, mistress.'

Romana easily kept pace with the robot as they headed down the street and turned the corner. There was a low building halfway down the street, with a wide forecourt and a yellow and black bar serving as a barrier. The Doctor had already reached the gate and was in an argument with several policemen. Romana had the terrible feeling that he was about to try a bluff. He reached into an inner pocket as she arrived at his side. He was definitely about to bluff. She prepared herself for that increasingly familiar sense of embarrassment.

'UNIT!' the Doctor barked, waving two badges at them.

'Oh, sorry, sir.' The sergeant stood back, letting them past and pointing them towards the largest building. 'You should have said. The chap from the MMB is in the main warehouse.'

'MMB?' Romana whispered as they strode confidently across the asphalt. K9 whirred into speech.

'The Milk Marketing Board of England. UK. Twentieth century, Earth Common Era. Purportedly a governmental body with the remit to advertise and encourage the drinking of the lactic fluid of the Earth bovine species. Records made available in 2028ECE under the Freedom of Information Act revealed that the MMB was a special investigation section of UNIT (q.v.). The MMB television advertisements produced via the auspices of the United Nations Intelligence Gathering and Tactical Executive in the 1970s ECE were, in fact, public information warning films.'

Romana nodded. 'UNIT?' she queried.

The Doctor grabbed her arm and guided her towards a man in a white coat who was staring abstractly at a chalk outline on the floor. 'I'll explain later,' he whispered as they reached the scene. The man looked up. Romana saw dark eyes, cheekbones worth wasting a regeneration for and a mass of brown hair flopping into his face before he turned to address the Doctor.

'Ah, you must be the current one. I'm Rob. We've got an odd one here. Look at this,' he pointed downwards. The Doctor stared at the gold foil pieces scattered across the crime area.

'That's my gold top! Well, that *was* my gold top,' he grumbled. He twisted his head sideways and studied the mess of glass, milk and still-drying blood. Romana looked up to see the man from the MMB smiling sympathetically at her. She was unable to resist giving him a quick smile back.

'This isn't their usual tactic, is it?' the Doctor suddenly asked.

'Not usual, no, Doctor.' Rob answered. 'There's been incidents before, of course, but no deaths. This is unprecedented.'

'Sir?' The policeman approached them, holding his radio near his ear. 'Sorry to interrupt, sir, but there's been another one.'

There was a milkfloat parked askew in the cul-de-sac, as if some TV cops had just screamed up to investigate and were flouting the normal rules of parallel parking. Rob recognised its owners as James and

Ernest. The two MMB men, dressed in the standard white suits, were talking to a teenaged girl in the garden. She had her back to the doorstep and was wiping her tear-reddened eyes repeatedly on the cuff of her ripped stripy sweater. Her blue Mohican flopped sadly over, not yet stiffened for the day.

Rob turned back to the Doctor and Romana, leaning over the driver seat as he parked so he could get another surreptitious look at them. What UNIT employee hadn't sneaked into Personnel at some point, intrigued by the legendary stories of the Doctor and his beautiful women only to find a blank file and a few tantalising stills? The Doctor was all he had imagined: tall, deliberately eccentric. He was crammed into the back seat, his long legs nearly doubled up. This Romana was a new one. She had a studied elegance that contrasted her companion's jumbled appearance, as if she had stepped out of a Charlie advert. Rob realised he was still gabbling to them, nervous.

'The Humph-' Rob caught himself, horrified, mid-word. '*They* have been actively snatching milk for centuries. We think the brownies of

folklore were actually early appearances.'

'Brownies?' Romana asked, wrinkling her nose just a tiny amount.

'A form of faerie or elf who performed household tasks,' the Doctor clarified from within the swathes of scarf, 'in return for an offering of milk.'

As they struggled to unload K9 from the car one of the MMB men came over and handed Rob his notebook.

'Girl found the victim, sir,' Ernest whispered, 'her name's Fran. Granddaughter of the deceased.' Rob nodded as he skimmed the notes. This was big, the biggest case he'd ever got to work on solo. Suddenly he wasn't sure he wanted the Doctor here after all, being brilliant, taking the credit. Rob took a calming breath and glanced at the punk girl. She had got her nose ring caught in her holed cuff and was trying to untangle it. He decided to give her a few minutes to compose herself and strode confidently over to the front door.

The coconut Welcome mat was dark with absorbed spilt blood and milk, the glass bottom panel of the door smashed. One large shard lay on the mat, slick with fluid. The body had, thankfully, being carried away for a full autopsy but one fluffy, floral slipper lay on the step, next to a still full bottle of milk.

'Interesting.' The Doctor was at his shoulder, staring down.

'What is?' Rob asked.

'The untouched bottle. Well, I say untouched bottle when I mean “untouched by *them*" bottle.' The Doctor crouched down and picked something up off the step.

“What's so interesting about that?' Romana sounded bored, Rob noticed, her arms folded. Clearly she was used to this sort of thing. The Doctor looked up at her.

'What did you notice at the milk depot?'

'Your gold top?' Romana tried. The Doctor shook his head.

'Blood?' Rob tried. The Doctor shook his head again.

'All the returning floats had been diverted hadn't they? Of course they had,' the Doctor confirmed before Rob could, 'so why were there so many dirty empties in the warehouse? The only milk that hadn't been snatched was the stuff contaminated by the blood.'

'Your gold top?' Romana questioned, hopefully.

'Quite, quite.' The Doctor waved one hand about to gesture for their silence. His other hand rubbed at his chin as he glared at the undrunk milk. 'Of course!' The Doctor leapt up and smacked his forehead with his palm, then looked at his hand as if he was offended. '*They*'re massing, building up enough strength to break through entirely!'

He was already striding towards the empty milkfloat. Romana glanced at Rob, shrugged hopelessly at him and they hurried after the Doctor. 'Who are?' she called.

'The Humph- *them*. Come on, hop on.'

Romana reluctantly stepped into the mate's side of the float as the Doctor turned the keys. She grabbed onto the doorframe as the vehicle jerked into life and she was almost thrown off balance. Rob hurried alongside the float as the Doctor executed a seven point turn.

'What's the rush?' he asked.

'They'll be attacking at dusk. Terribly undramatic of them but that's these third rate extra dimensional creatures all over - no sense of occasion. Where's the biggest depot in the area?'

'On the A381, just before Kempton race track. Can't miss it. I'll meet you there - I need to finish here first.'

The Doctor nodded and stepped on the accelerator, pushing the vehicle up towards its top speed of fifteen miles an hour. Rob stood in the middle of the cul-de-sac, staring after the slowly receding van. Fran and Ernest joined him. The blue haired girl had her reddened eyes scrunched up against the afternoon sunlight.

''Ere, that were my float!' the man in white protested. Rob grinned at him.

'I'm sure we'll get it back, Ernie.'

Romana sat primly on the tiny flip-up seat next to the Doctor, who had his foot pressed hard on the accelerator. She was not going to mention how ridiculous this was. How embarrassing. How demeaning. She was the Lady Romanadvoratrelundar of the House Antil- oh, for Rassilon's sake!

'Doctor! This is ridiculous!'

'Is it? I rather thought it was fun.'

Romana scowled. She went to fold her arms but found that, without her arm bracing her on the doorjamb, the rattling van was liable to throw her off her precarious seat.

'We left K9 back there.' She used her most sensible tone.

'I'm sure he'll scrounge a lift off that young man who was making eyes at you.' The Doctor ignored the squeal of brakes behind them as he took a sudden right turn without indicating. The electric motor, already at its limits, whined as it tried to pull the float up onto the A381 bypass. He waved a stately hand to the indignant car horns.

'Doctor? Loathe as I am to ask, who are the Humph-!' Romana swatted the Doctor's hand off her mouth. He was staring at her in horror, the float drifting across the lanes of traffic. 'Watch out!' she shouted.

The Doctor spotted the juggernaut behind them and wrenched the wheel over, getting them into the slow lane just in time.

'Don't use *their* name!' he reprimanded her sternly.

'Why not?'

'Well,' he considered briefly, then grinned. 'No one else does, do they?' He shrugged. 'They are one of those inter-dimensional races, popping through the fabric of the universe all over the place, causing untold damage. Evil from the Time of Dawn. That sort of thing.'

'Oh.' Romana remarked flatly. 'That sort of thing.'

'Yes.' The Doctor coughed as his voice caught on the word. 'This new straw manifestation is worrying though. Used to be a fairly peaceful lot. Handy to have round the house. Now they're killing for milk, draining depots dry.'

'Except for that bottle at the old dear's house.'

'Precisely. Tell me, do you know the origins of the word fascist?'

There was a high-pitched whine from the empty hard shoulder next to Romana. She glanced down and saw K9 overtaking them, his tail wagging. She shifted as discreetly as she could on the uncomfortable plastic seat and settled in for the lecture.

They spotted it as they overshot the junction. To the right of the road, a massive dairy with all its lights blazing. The Doctor had said that it wasn't the right place at first, until Romana had pointed out the large

plaster cows on the roof. He had reluctantly conceded that she might have a point and reversed back up the bypass until they could turn off.

They zoomed into the yard, a security man rushing to close the iron gates behind them. The float puttered to a stop in front of Rob, who was leaning on his car, and K9, who was making quiet whirring motor noises to suggest he was panting.

'I've got the place under heavy security.' The MMB man told them.

'I see,' the Doctor said. He draped a friendly arm over Rob's shoulders and led them over to the iron fire escape bolted to the side of the building. Romana sighed when she saw the climb, knowing she would be the one to carry K9 up four flights. 'Tell me,' the Doctor asked Rob, 'how good do you think iron railings and guns are against creatures who just extrude a tiny part of themselves into, or out of, this dimension at will?'

Rob sighed as they began to climb up towards the roof. 'So what's your suggestion, Doctor?' he said through gritted teeth. The Doctor climbed the final flight and helped Rob and Romana onto the flat roof. The parapet was peppered with lifesize cows, staring placidly over the suburban skyline as it darkened. The Doctor leaned on a flank to catch his breath.

'Blue tits!' he gasped.

'*What*?'

The Doctor fumbled about in a jacket pocket for a moment, before pulling out a downy yellow feather in triumph.

'Pares caeruleus? Native bird species? Uncanny knack of opening milk bottles and drinking the cream? Been known to trail milk floats? They'd been at Mrs. Watt's milk and got the lid open on one before the Hu- ...before *they* arrived.'

Romana took the feather from him and inspected it. 'The milk *they* left was the bottle these avian creatures had opened?'

'Yes. *They* can't use contaminated milk. Can't digest it.' The Doctor paused to cough again.

Rob blanched. 'I hope you're not about to suggest we deliberately ruin all the milk in the dairy? This place serves most of London!'

The Doctor grinned at him. 'No. You know how the British get if they

can't have their milk. Doesn't bear thinking about.' He studiously ignored Romana's raised eyebrow.

'So what are you suggesting?' the MMB man questioned, letting more of his exasperation show.

The Doctor leant back against the plaster Friesian and whistled.

'Doctor?'

'We whistle, my dear Rob. I happen to do a very good impersonation of a tit and my perfect *tserr err err err* will attract the birds. Hopefully, their very presence will repel our massing friends out there.' He gestured behind him, over the parapet.

Romana stared out into the dusk. He was right, there was something out there. She could sense that the air was not empty at all, despite its appearance. It felt... loaded. *They* were preparing a mass assault on the dairy. Snatching their strength from the milk within. Tomorrow morning, London would wake to disorientated breakfasts and would be ill prepared for the actual attack by the lactose-empowered creatures. She caught the merest glimpse of red and white on the edge of her perception. Rob was still looking in disbelief at the frantically whistling Doctor. Of course, his human senses could only tell something was wrong, he couldn't perceive *them* yet. The Doctor frowned at her, pausing for a moment.

'You do know how to whistle, don't you? You just put...'

'Yes, Doctor,' she interrupted. 'I am perfectly aware of this primitive method of tonal expression.'

Romana started to copy the pattern of notes the Doctor was making. She was cautious at first: it wasn't something a well brought up Time Lady should be able to do. Rob was staring at them in bewilderment.

'You're mad! Both of you! No wonder the files say “approach with caution"! Blue tits only fly and sing in the morning! It's dusk! This is madness!'

The spotlights that lit up the plaster statues suddenly burst into life, their timer switch tripping on. Huge, contorted shadows stretched across the flat roof, overlapping and making it harder to see what was happening. Romana caught a glimpse of movement behind Rob.

Something red and white emerging from the darkness. No, more than one. She broke off from her whistling as the forms took solid shape, their ranks bearing down on the young man.

'Rob! Watch out! There's a Humph-'

He spun at her shout, yelling incoherently as he realised the creatures were on top of him. He scrambled backwards, stumbling across the flat roof towards her. The Doctor gestured at her frantically.

'Don't stop!' he shouted, between breaths. He suddenly gasped, doubled-over, coughing violently. Romana was torn. Her throat wasn't strong enough, her whistle didn't carry. She should help the Doctor, but Rob had fallen now, the ranks breaking around him, hiding him from view.

'Mistress!'

K9 was struggling through the mass, his blaster extruded but not firing. 'I have recorded the Master's and your own noises. Do I have permission to reproduce them?'

'Do it, K9!'

The dog began, replaying both her timid sounds and the Doctor's enthusiastic tones. Taking a deep breath, she started to whistle again and fought her way through the solidifying creatures towards the fallen MMB man. She could feel *them* against her skin. Waxy, papery, slick. Repellent. It felt wrong, as if such material couldn't be alive. She found Rob's form, his white jacket flecked with blood from the tiny cuts *they* had inflicted. She started to pull him free, back towards the parapet. Almost there. She felt a creature beneath her boot, its oily surface sliding free, tipping her over. She gasped as she hit the parapet, one arm crashing into a plaster flank, making the bovine statue totter on the brink of the drop. Her breath was jolted out of her.

It wasn't going to be enough. They couldn't make enough noise, couldn't tempt any real birds onto the rooftop. It was too late. Everywhere she looked was filled with encroaching red and white. *They* would rip the dairy apart, absorbing all the milk and gaining a permanent beachhead into this dimension. She let herself sag against the model cow. What a terribly embarrassing way to trigger your first regeneration, she thought.

Raising her head to see what had become of the Doctor, she saw a speck of yellow and blue. Tiny, darting about in the riot of red and white. It dove for the parapet and landed there. And called. *tserr err err err*. Then another joined it. And another and another. The dawn chorus had arrived.

It was curiously muted the next morning, as the first grey-pink smudge of dawn broke the horizon. All around the dairy, tiny blue-headed, yellow-bodied birds were flying away, calling out only occasionally now. One of the dairy staff had, once it was clear that the attackers were retreating, put a half-churn of milk out in the yard and the birds had taken turns to sip quickly from it.

Romana leant back on the parapet, between the legs of two plaster cows. She had a massive mug of tea cupped in her hands. The Doctor wandered back up the fire-escape, having seen Rob into an ambulance. His boots sent up a flurry of shed feathers and crackled on a few broken shells of *them*. He leaned against the cow next to her.

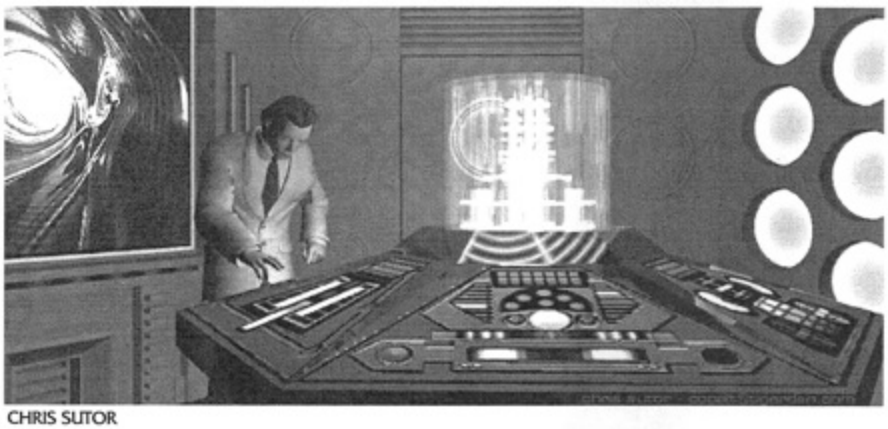
'Well, that's that then. Time to be off,' he remarked.

'All the Humphr-' she coughed when the Doctor frowned at her, 'all of *them* are gone?'

'Yes, I don't think they were expecting organised resistance. The birds will patrol now, keep *them* at bay.'

They fell silent for a minute. In unison, they turned and leant their elbows on the parapet. The first glossy yellow stretch of sunlight appeared in the lightening blue sky. It was going to be a beautiful late summer's day, Romana realised. She also conceded, privately, that it had all been quite enjoyable.

'I think I might go blonde,' she remarked, 'they say they have more fun.'



CHRIS SLITOR

The Isidore Corporation

SARAH HADLEY

The doors opened, and a man stepped into the lobby of the Isidore Corporation. He was of medium height, erring towards the side of tall, and of medium build, erring on the side of excess. He had hair of a rough dirty blond colour, and a smile that came straight from the cat who ate the canary.

'Hello there, my good man,' he told the shifty young receptionist. 'I believe Mr Isidore is waiting to see me. Why don't you ensure that I'm properly, mm, announced?'

The receptionist stared up at the newcomer's smug grin. 'You're the new scientist.'

'I am indeed.' The man pulled a card from the inside pocket of his shockingly colourful coat, and presented it to the receptionist. 'I think you will find that everything is in order.'

A cursory check. 'Yeah, that's ok,' the receptionist confirmed. He pressed a button to the side of his desk. 'Reception to Mr Isidore's office; that new scientist is on his way.'

'Splendid, splendid. Send him in.'

The receptionist turned back to his client. 'Right, sir, you can go on in. On the left, two doors down from the lab.'

'Thank you.' The scientist turned sharply on his heel. He strode to the indicated door, observing as he did the nameplates on some of the other offices. Dr James Khan, Genetics, read one. Dr Simon Lithburn, Anatomic Specialist. Row after row of doctors, professors and varied experts. Prof Harrison Young, Robotics.

Finally, the man came to the door of one Dr John Isidore, General Manager, Owner, Head of Research and Funding. He rapped smartly on the metal surface with his knuckles. In a brief moment, he found the time to straighten a small cat badge on his lapel.

The door slid open, and he entered the office. In the corner of the room, by a computer terminal, was a middle-aged man in a white lab

coat. He had bright, intelligent eyes and a surly mouth, with a fair amount of unruly hair. 'Ah, come in,' he said, and gestured at the chair placed before the main desk. 'Take a seat.'

The newcomer did so, beaming audaciously. He resisted the urge to put his feet up on the desk.

With slow, calculated moves, the man in the lab coat crossed the room and sat down opposite him. 'Welcome to the Isidore family,' he said briskly. 'Your papers are in order, of course.'

'Meticulously.'

'You realise what you have been hired to do?'

'Not quite - but I imagine you will explain.'

'We've been told you're the best in your field. A man so dedicated to science, so completely ingenious that he can head our new project.' The man in the lab coat smiled briefly. 'I hear you like cats.'

'Yes,' agreed the scientist, 'you could say that.'

'Then I am sure you'll appreciate the work going on here at the Corporation. Oh yes, most certainly.'

'But you still haven't - if I may, indeed, be so bold - explained why I'm here.'

'Oh.' The man in the lab coat paused. 'I believe Mr Isidore wants to explain that himself. I was merely asked to make your acquaintance.'

'You're...not Isidore, then?'

'No. I'm his new assistant manager, his protégé if you like.' The man in the lab coat stood up, waited for a moment, and then extended his hand as the scientist belatedly followed suit.

'Sorry,' said the newcomer, in a tone that suggested he wasn't sorry at all. 'My friends are always telling me to exercise, and they're right, of course. Can't get too comfortable, mm?'

They shook hands briskly and formally. 'Thank you,' said the man in the lab coat. 'Please check in on Monday for your instructions from Mr Isidore.' The scientist turned to leave, but the man in the lab coat put out a restraining hand. 'Just a moment.'

'Yes?'

The man in the lab coat crossed back to the computer terminal. 'I'd just like to make sure our computer files are accurate. Your full name is John Sullivan Smith?'

'Just so.'

'Quite a...common name.'

The scientist nodded, and then seemed struck by a thought of his own. 'Incidentally, since we may be working together, would you mind repeating yours?'

'I didn't give it.' The man in the lab coat chuckled down his nose. 'But I suppose it can do no harm.'

'Well, then?' Smith prompted.

'I am known to my friends and colleagues,' said the man in the lab coat, gripping one lapel absent-mindedly with his hand, 'as the Doctor.'

Darkness rises and the city is cast in smothering grey, never quite clear; the light is expelled by a combination of pollution and bad weather. It is never truly day here, only absence from night.

In an old high-rise apartment, standing at the window, is a girl. She's pretty, but not beautiful; her smile is what makes her appealing. Her smile and her good heart. She's American, born and bred, but from an America long past. This is all as alien to her as the icy dunes of a far-off world, or the battlefields of the Civil War. She has seen both and lived to tell it.

She is wearing an old beige bathrobe, her hand clutching at the collar. She has short hair but she'd like to wear it longer. One small portion of her mind asks her what surprises the day holds, but in reality she knows it will be the same as the others...waiting, waiting, waiting. She has been waiting a very long time.

It's her choice, each day. When she first arrived and took up residence in the apartment, she went out for a walk in an open-collared tee shirt and hot pink shorts. Although she considered her attire perfectly appropriate for the season and heat of the day, she was shocked to discover that others took them for something else. She could feel the eyes watching her as she walked by.

One man offered her fifty dollars. She hasn't been out since then.

Allowing her mind to wander, the girl finds herself bored. 'Oh, for a real friend,' she sighs at the world outside. 'Why am I stuck in a crazy movie with a clown and a big phone booth? Why didn't I leave after the Cybermen?'

Now she's walking away from the window, turning down the corridor to her bedroom. As she passes, she takes up a brush from a dresser table and runs it absent-mindedly through her hair.

She comes to her bedroom and goes to the closet, intending to pick out something very conservative. She is surprised to find all of her clothing gone, replaced by new, richly woven items. 'Oh, Doctor.' She takes a hanger out from inside the wardrobe. A dark blue blouse, neatly cut and styled, paired with light grey trousers and a pretty, green and blue neckerchief. Completing the ensemble was a small, silver tiepin in the shape of the head of a grinning cat.

There was a note inside one pocket of the trousers: "I suppose I shall have to get new clothes altogether,' said Alice.'

Peri grins.

'My name is Avan Tarklu, and I work the beat in the darkest, dankest corners L.A. has to offer. My office is a two-door shack in one of Chinatown's alleys. Timid women fear me, average women look at me askance, and big women ignore me...much to their detriment. I can recognise over fifty varieties of tobacco and seventy varieties of cigarette. I graduated with honours from the school of disguise, and I eat spicy food.

'My name is Avan Tarklu, and I'm a private eye.'

The janitor blinked twice at the little man looking up at him. 'And...?'

The little man stared from behind the thick lenses of his glasses. 'And you, fella, can help me. Okay?'

'Okay.' The janitor shrugged. 'What's up?'

'I'm tracking this powerful guy - big in the science world, independently wealthy, elusive as hell. Name's the Doctor.'

'Doctor who?'

'Real funny, pal. I know the Doctor lives in this building; Apartment 3B, to be exact. He's got some sorta chick with him, too...' The janitor's face lit up. '...And I see that you, being a man with a keen eye for detail, have noticed.' Tarklu took out a little notepad from the inside pocket of his trenchcoat. 'What can you tell me?'

'I like her nose. She has a very defined nose.'

Tarklu's eyebrows rose ever so slightly. 'Definitely a man for... detail.

What about the Doctor?'

'Oh, him? A big wig in one of the major companies. He's not here very often.' The janitor appeared to consider. 'Rosen Industries, maybe? Isidore? Yee? Frauenzimmer?'

The little man shrugged. 'And the girl...does she ever leave the apartment?'

'No, I don't think so.' The janitor sighed wistfully.

'Yeah, you like her nose. Has anyone come looking for her?'

'Now that you mention it...yeah. One of the other tenants went up about an hour ago to see her. Hasn't come down yet.' Tarklu seemed to tense slightly, and the janitor was quick to explain. 'No, it's not like that; she's just a kid. Fifteen or sixteen.' He hesitated. 'I think her brother...the kid's brother, I mean...works in another of the big companies. The same one, maybe?'

Half an hour later, Peri felt like a new woman. She preened and postured in front of the mirror, adjusting her scarf in a number of ways. The attitude expressed in the diary entry was completely gone.

She'd never known the Doctor to be so kind. Where did he get this idea? It wasn't like him to take interest in her clothes, or to buy her a gift. Still... she couldn't help but feel pleased. She'd never had clothes like these before...

Her heart dropped, then, as her mind wandered. She'd left for her travels with the Doctor when she was just eighteen - no real time for school, or friends, or... relationships. With a sudden burst of sadness, she realised that no boy had ever bought her a gift.

And then the buzzer rang.

'Who is it?'

No answer.

All thoughts aside, Peri walked quickly to the front door, not pausing even to put on her shoes. 'It can't be the Doctor,' she muttered. When she reached the entrance, she opened the door with a fierce pull - the chain across the lock kept it from opening more than an inch. She peered out, hardly knowing what she'd find.

It was a girl, younger than Peri, but not by much. She was a few inches shorter, with pale skin, hazel eyes and bright yellow hair. It's like

the colour of the neighbours' house, Peri thought to herself, that same canary yellow. The girl was clothed in what appeared to be a strange, plastic combination of bikini and coveralls, mainly green and black, with a pair of black boots. She's straight out of a music video.

The girl blinked once at Peri. Her face was covered in much makeup; heavy eyeliner, blush, and grey-blue lip gloss. It made her look... well...

'Are you Mrs. Smith?' the girl asked, in a surprisingly clear voice.

For a moment, Peri found it hard to speak. 'I'm - my name is Peri.'

The girl smiled nervously. 'That's a kind name.'

'What's yours?' Peri smiled back.

'Pauley.'

Finally, Peri's brain snapped back into motion. 'Well, why don't you come in?' she said, unhooking the chain on the door. 'Have you had lunch?'

Pauley looked around nervously, as if she was afraid Peri had been speaking to someone else. 'No.'

'Good!' Peri laughed. 'Come on... we'll see what I can whip up. If we're very, very lucky, it might be recognisable by the time I'm done...'

Tarklu rubbed his hands together anxiously. He watched as L.A.P.D.'s esper machine clicked and whirred, searching through its many visual databases. Tarklu had fed it a picture of the Doctor, taken by an amateur photographer some months before. Although espers were typically used to find clues within photographs, they could also check for matches within the P.D.'s massive, sprawling system.

There was a beep, and a single ident file scrolled across the esper's screen. 'LABYRINTH, DOCTOR,' it read 'FIRST/MIDDLE NAME UNKNOWN.' Tarklu bent forward. scanning the long lines of information. 'KNOWN TO FREQUENT SCIENTIFIC CIRCLES.'

There was suspiciously little concrete information on the Doctor, but Tarklu did learn enough to tell him where he could find his suspect: at the Isidore Corporation, as Mr Isidore's right-hand man. Out of curiosity, he checked Isidore's file, but it was totally blank. He confirmed an internal theory; already, he knew who could tell him more.

He stood up and switched the esper off just as a policeman entered

the room. 'Long day, Bob,' he told Tarklu, foam coffee cup in hand. 'Gettin' off for the day soon, thank Mercer.'

Tarklu nodded pleasantly at him, turned, and left. He walked briskly through the lobby of the station, avoiding the eyes of prisoners and guards alike. When he reached the door, he stopped for a moment, considering his next move. After a moment, satisfied, he swung the door back and exited the building.

'Poor guy,' he said to himself as he crossed the street. 'My name isn't Bob.'

Peri finished the last of her soup. 'I guess you can't hurt good old tomato soup, huh?'

It had taken Peri a long time to convince her guest to eat. At first, the girl had acted like she was below the privilege of eating. Then she'd become increasingly self-conscious, as if she thought Peri would turn her out at a moment's failing. Peri was quick to assure her that she was glad of some company.

Still, though, Pauley seemed uncomfortable. She looks like a punk at church, thought Peri. Something's wrong here. A sudden thought struck her. 'Are you supposed to be in school?'

'No,' responded Pauley easily. 'But I still learn things.'

'You're tutored, then?'

'I guess you'd say that.'

Peri laughed. 'Don't worry; I was only wondering, really.'

'I think I've met the Doctor,' said Pauley suddenly. 'Is here often?'

Peri shook her head. 'Hardly ever. He's very caught up in his work. I'm not even sure what he does.' She stood up and took her bowl to the sink. 'Do you live with your mom and dad?'

The guest shook her head. 'No, I haven't seen them in a long time. They're... dead.'

'I'm sorry,' said Peri automatically, returning to her seat. Time to change the subject...

Pauley did it for her. She leant forward and touched Peri's scarf experimentally. 'Your clothes are beautiful.'

'Do you like them? The Doctor got them for me.'

'They're wonderful.' Pauley rubbed her thumb and forefinger as if

trying to memorise the feel of the fabric. 'You must've made level four. I'm still level two.'

There was silence for a moment; Pauley seemed a bit in awe, Peri wondered what the girl was talking about. Finally, Peri made a decision. She liked Pauley, but her guest looked so worried...

'I'm really glad I met you,' she told Pauley. 'Can you come for lunch tomorrow?'

Paisley seemed to light up. 'Sure! Well... why don't you come to my apartment, this time? Apartment 2H.'

'You've got a deal.' Peri, beaming, extended her hand. 'Let's shake on it.'

Pauley happily reached over and clasped the other girl's hand. And flinched.

Surprised, Peri lifted the girl's hand to her face. There was a welt on the inside of the palm, making out a stylised 'A' shape.

'What happened?' asked Peri, shocked. 'Who did that?'

Pauley drew back her arm quickly. 'I burned myself,' she explained. 'When I was adjusting the heat last night. We still have the old-style heaters.' She stood up, looking nervous again. 'I need to go now... I'll see you later, Peri.' She crossed the room and closed the door behind her.

Peri sat, stunned, for a moment. What made her do that? 'Oh well,' she said aloud. 'Tomorrow at lunchtime, then...'

That evening, Mr John Sullivan Smith stepped through the door without knocking. He moved quickly to the closet, removing coat and scarf and shaking long-dried raindrops off his collar. 'Hello?'

Pauley's shock-blond head peered out from around the corner. 'Hello!' she beamed. 'John, you're home early. Did you get the job?'

'It was in the bag all along,' he smirked, pulling off his tie. 'That Isidore fellow had already put his stamp on it. Nothing to do but walk in and introduce myself.' He postured himself before the mirror in the closet door, licked his hand and ran it over his curly hair. 'They didn't even mind my looks.'

Pauley laughed gaily and returned to the kitchenette. 'Grandfather's always said you're a snappy dresser.'

Smith grinned as if he was making a joke. 'He should know.' Smith followed her to the kitchenette. 'What culinary delights await us?'

'Stir-fry.' Pauley peered at the blackening mass in her frying pan. 'Maybe.'

'Sounds exotic.'

'Hardly. Grandfather gave me the recipe, but I think I've missed something...'

'Hmm.' Smith went to the refrigerator and found a fizzy drink. 'Well, I can't cook, and you can't cook. How about some sandwiches?'

'All-all right.' There was a slight quiver in Pauley's voice.

'And then I'll call it an early night. I've got a big day tomorrow.' He said it casually, but his eyes were glued to the back of Pauley's head.

There was a slight hesitation, then Pauley turned and smiled. 'Of course.' She hurried to get some bread from the bin. 'So tell me about the Corporation. Any interesting people there?'

'Afraid not. There's this one chap... but he's just a supervisor, and an unpleasant one at that.'

'Too bad.' Pauley began to pile cheese on the bread. 'I met someone nice today.'

'Oh?' Smith was interested. 'That's good - I'm glad to see you getting out a bit. Who'd you meet?'

'This nice girl a few levels up. She's new in the area. About my age... pretty...'

Smith leered mockingly. 'Go on!'

Pauley rolled her eyes. 'Stop that, John. Anyway, I just went over to say hi, but she invited me in for lunch... and then back again tomorrow. I don't think I've met anyone that friendly before.'

'Present company excepted.'

'Of course, John.' Pauley gestured vaguely with a knife covered in mustard. 'She's in Apartment 3S. I think she lives with a scientist of some kind, a Doctor somebody.'

Smith almost choked on his soda. 'Apartment 3S?'

'Yes. Why?'

'That's the Doctor... that's my supervisor...'

Pauley was as surprised as he. 'Oh! Well, I hope I made a good impression...'

'Yeah, I hope so too.' Smith calmed down and finished his soda. 'Look, Pauley, never mind the sandwiches. I better get on to bed.' He stood up, watching her reaction for a moment, and walked off towards his bedroom.

Pauley looked down at the now-finished sandwiches and sighed. A tiny shiver ran up her spine...

Tarklu turned down another alley, taking quick, light steps and blinking at the neon signs around him. He passed the Chew-Z bar, the Jamaican café, the massage parlour... Eventually, he stopped before an impressive brick building, the establishment's name painted on the side to resemble an old façade. The Behemoth, it read. Tavern and Foodstuffs. Tarklu stepped up to the front door and rang the bell.

The automated door swung open, admitting Tarklu from the rain. He walked into the high-ceilinged room, and crossed immediately to the bar, tracking water with his thick-soled shoes. A man stood there, wiping the counter with a grimy cloth.

'Hey, guy! Haven't seen you around here much. Where've they been keepin' you? In a toolbox?' The bartender grinned broadly. He wasn't a bad sort; a little too nosy, perhaps, but a good contact and even better at forgetting things. Meetings, for instance, and deals...

'What do you know about the Isidore Corporation?'

The bartender crumpled the cloth into his apron pocket as he thought 'Isidore and his boys? Well...Young Man Isidore is a legend, everybody knows him. He's made the list of modern greats, up there with Rosen, but the difference is...nobody's seen him.'

'Ever?'

'Nan.' The bartender shook his head. 'Forty years ago, they saw him. Genetic scientist, always in his books, always doing research. Someone gave him a grant, and he built his pet corporation. Nobody's seen him since that.'

'Then why do you call him Young Man Isidore?'

'Huh?'

'"Forty years ago, they saw him." Unless the average life-span has shot up a century or two...'

'Oh! Don't you know? It's his voice. They don't see him, but they

hear his voice.' The bartender paused. 'Some people say he sounds like a boy.'

'A boy? Twenty, twenty-five?'

'Sure.'

'Maybe it's his son.'

'No...it's Isidore, all right. Sometimes his old friends go. Sometimes they ask him things, things only he would know. He always knows.' The bartender leaned on the counter, chin in hand, and whispered. 'They say his old flame went and saw him, about ten years ago. She was a businesswoman, very sharp, very cynical. Made a lot of money on colony transport. No time for feelings, but she thought she'd go and get a laugh.'

'And?'

'She came out sobbing, I've been told. Something he said broke her heart.'

Tarklu raised an eyebrow behind his thick spectacles. 'Tell me,' he said, changing tack, 'what does he do at his corporation?'

The bartender shook his head. 'Isidore has friends in the government. He doesn't have to tell the public, so he hasn't - not in forty years.'

'So there's just one thing left to ask.'

'Hmm?'

'How do I get in?'

'And this is the processing room.' The medium-tall man in the white lab coat waved a hand over the hundreds of scientists below his feet. He was standing with his associate on a long, makeshift bridge, stretched across a huge, sterile room containing labs and computers of all kinds. Like ants, the scientists buzzed from one machine to another, reading numbers and interpreting them. 'This is where many of our lower-grade employees spend their days.'

The younger man adjusted his tie for the fourth time that day. 'Do we have much contact with them?'

'No,' his superior smiled thinly. 'We have a seven-member team to oversee that aspect of business.'

He blinked behind his thick-rimmed glasses, and gestured. 'Watch.'

A group of scientists on the floor were arguing over a computer terminal, obviously in disagreement over its readings. One scientist, particularly, seemed to be antagonising his fellows. Slowly, a long, dark arm unfolded itself from the wall, swerving to aim at the scientist. Puht-puht-puht!

The Doctor turned to beam at young Sullivan Smith, obscuring his view of the floor. 'See? Must have been a bad nut.' It occurred to Smith that it sounded like a quote, but he couldn't quite place it.

The Doctor moved briskly on, motioning for Smith to follow. 'Come on, come on.' The younger man caught up with the other, and together they went down corridor after corridor, twisting and turning until they reached...

...An entirely blank room.

'That's the grand tour,' said the Doctor crisply. 'Everything you need to know for your first day.' He beamed arrogantly at Smith.

There was a long silence.

Finally, Smith spoke up. 'Well?' he said, pulling the folds of his baggy red coat around him. 'Is there anything else, then? I'm expected at home.'

There was a fleeting smile. 'Oh? How is your girl getting on?'

'Fine, fine. She's adjusting to the change very well.'

'Good. We wouldn't want her to be unhappy, would we? No, Mr Smith, I'm quite finished with you.' The Doctor removed his glasses and began cleaning them with the edge of his lab coat. 'But I do think Mr Isidore should like a word.'

'Oh!' Smith was momentarily taken aback. 'Will he be along soon?'

A thin, reedy giggle filled the room. 'You mistake me, Mr John Sullivan Smith,' said a matching voice. 'I'm already here.'

The Doctor's supercilious smile returned as Smith joined him out in the corridor. The older man had left after the first few moments, realising that his presence was no longer required. In between that time and Smith's eventual exit, the Doctor had issued five orders, given clearance to some of the higher equipment, reviewed reports from seventeen top scientists, and had a cup of coffee. A typical twenty-five minutes as Mr Joseph Isidore's assistant manager.

'Well?' he asked Smith. 'How did you find Mr Isidore? Informative?'

Smith nodded solemnly. 'He's doing important work.'

'Very important, Mr Smith, very important.' The Doctor took a step towards the new scientist. 'You are to be one of our research geneticists; experimenters, if you will. I believe you received chemical samples in the post?'

'Yes. I began running the desired tests as soon as my job was approved by the Corporation, and I received my test subject.' Smith's face was clouded for a moment.

The Doctor gave him a steely glare. 'Mr Smith, I trust you are not the sort of man who feels he cannot experiment on animals? That such trials should be contained to theory only?'

'No, no, of course, it's necessary. It's... enjoyable.' Smith smiled nervously. 'I like my job.'

'That's good.' The Doctor clasped his hand. 'The Corporation needs people like you. Let's go to work!'

'I'm sorry the salad wasn't very good. I'm not much of a cook. really.' Pauley stared sadly down at the limp remnants of vegetables in the salad bowl.

'No, no; it was just fine. Very filling.' Peri didn't want to tell her that it was almost impossible to ruin a standard salad, and yet somehow, she had done it. 'Thanks for having me over.'

The apartment Pauley shared with Sullivan Smith was even sparser than Peri and the Doctor's, if that was at all possible. Neither occupant seemed a particularly orderly person, their personal items strewn about over the tables and chairs. Peri reflected that it could use a good spring-cleaning. Next lunch, she decided, it's going to be 'my place'... or my allergies may lose it.

Pauley's attention had turned back to her awe of Peri. 'You told me earlier that you've travelled. What sort of places have you been to?'

'Why don't you come over to my apartment for a while?' Peri suggested tactfully. 'I've got some photos somewhere which you might like...'

'Tweezers.' The Doctor snapped his fingers unpleasantly. 'Come on,

come on...'

Sullivan Smith scrabbled through the tool tray, eventually finding the tweezers. 'Here.'

'Thank... you.' The Doctor took the instruments and held them over the petri dish. Steadying his hand, he reached in closely and selected a tiny growth. 'You see this, Smith?'

'Yes.'

'This is the beginning, Smith. The beginning of what Mr Isidore is working for.' The Doctor blinked. 'What time is it?'

'A little after noon; two o'clock, maybe.'

The Doctor did a quick calculation in his head. 'Eight... ten... twelve...' He turned back to Smith. 'Call home. Say you're going to be late. We've got a lot to do.' Smith looked blank, and the Doctor sighed. 'We must complete the experiment, Smith; how do you expect this biological growth to reach its peak before midnight? Hmmm?'

Sullivan Smith was quick to admit defeat. 'You're right. Let me make a quick call.' The Doctor made an allowing gesture and Smith moved quickly to the vidphone booth across the room.

He dialled quickly, waited for a few moments... nothing. Then the answering machine picked up. 'All right, Pauley, this is John. Just want to tell you I'll be home late... very late...'

She woke up at three o'clock in the morning.

One of those advertisement blimps was floating outside, taking whole sentences and splitting them into three-word exclamations. She still wasn't used to the noise they made, but she understood how, in time, it could become like the whistle of an early-morning train passing by.

Peri sat up blearily and rubbed her face. The bed, although fully adjustable by remote control, seemed determined to prolong the pain in her back. She groaned and tried to stretch.

It was unbearably hot. Peri unbuttoned the top half of her pajama shirt and sensed the cloth come stickily away from her skin. She reached inside with one hand, feeling her breasts and sternum; they were covered in a thick layer of sweat. After a few moments, she realised her entire body was covered in it. What could produce such a

temperature?

There was a soft cry from behind her. She turned, instantly clenching the collar of her shirt closed. Pauley lay sleeping on the far side of the bed, one arm draped unconsciously over Peri's pillow. She was dressed as she had been earlier that day, but without makeup she seemed younger and more innocent.

'Pauley?' said Peri, hesitantly. How had the girl come in? And when? And why didn't Peri remember it?

Slowly, the girl's eyes opened and came to focus on Peri. A smile broke across her face. 'Peri! You're up already?'

'I... I couldn't sleep.' Peri gulped and quickly did up her buttons. What was going on? 'What... what are you... doing here?'

'I came to see you.'

'Right, o-okay. Why?'

The smile grew wider. 'Because I like you, Peri.'

Peri tried to smile herself, but the result was nervous at best. 'I like you too, Pauley. But why are you here?'

'John had to stay late tonight.' There seemed to be something she wouldn't quite say. 'He's not home yet. I... I was scared.' She turned her head abruptly towards the window. 'It's very dark in the upper apartments. You hear noises.'

'Well, you should have...' Peri fumbled for a polite excuse. '...Knocked on the door. I mean, it's just... well, you can't just come into someone's apartment and crawl into bed with them.'

'John does.'

Peri could feel the hairs on her arms stand up, but said nothing. The heat was growing worse; she could feel it in her hair.

'John does whatever he wants,' continued Pauley, 'and as long as I agree, we're friends. Well... you're my only other friend, Peri. So I thought since John was out, I'd come see what you wanted.'

'Oh.' Peri felt as if she might throw up. 'Well, I don't -'

'Of course,' Pauley interrupted, 'I can always come back later.'

'No. That's not it. It's just...' Peri trailed off as a sudden wave of dizziness hit her. The heat was becoming overwhelming. 'It's just...'

'What? What's the matter?'

'It's...' Peri tried once more, but it was too late.

Pauley jumped up to catch her as she fell.

Zim-chuk-chuk. The Doctor watched as the gears turned in the huge machine, like some obscene creation from Wonka's factory. Zim-chuk-chuk-zim-chuk-chuk-zim-zimma-zimma-zim-chuk-chuk.

'It's all very simple,' the Doctor explained to Sullivan Smith. 'We put the test subject in here...' He gestured at the form obscured under plastic. '...And start the machine to work. Instantly, it reads the subject's biological and chemical makeup, charting down all the essential information, and it then prepares to operate.' Zim-chuk-chuk. 'The operations are... brief, but the results are not yet stable.' The Doctor gingerly reached over and opened the plastic lid.

Smith sucked in his breath. 'My God.'

'Only animals, Mr Smith,' the Doctor assured him, replacing the lid. 'Only animals, and genetically enhanced ones at that. Perfectly expendable. We create them a dime a dozen in the biolabs.'

'Yes... sorry. I know.'

'Perfectly understandable reaction, Mr Smith. And now, if you'd care to document this test subject...'

Sullivan Smith coughed politely. 'Doctor,' he said quietly, 'I think it's time I got home.'

'Oh? You just arrived. How disheartening.'

'About twenty-three hours ago, sir.'

The Doctor blinked. 'So it's Thursday now?'

'Saturday. Sir. There's... no-one else here.'

For a mere moment, the Doctor's face twitched in surprise. 'Yes,' he said slowly, 'quite. Get on home, then, Mr Smith. You may have the remainder of the day to yourself. Thank you for your assistance.'

'Right, sir. I'll be back.'

'Of course.' The Doctor watched languidly as Sullivan Smith collected his coat and case, stopped to discard an empty coffee cup, and finally departed.

As soon as he was alone, the Doctor's whole attitude changed. 'Saturday?' he reprimanded himself. 'Peri will be terribly frustrated... no, what is it? Livid.' He put an unconscious American accent on the last word. He rushed from place to place in the building, collecting

notes and diagrams he'd left scattered about. Finally, just before he left the Corporation, he took up the telephone and rang the apartment. The only reply he received was the answering machine. 'If you are looking for Peri Brown,' said a female voice the Doctor didn't recognise, 'please call Los Angeles General Hospital at the following number...'

She came to gradually, blinking at the light shining into her eyes. 'Wh-where am I?' she asked timidly. 'Hello? Is... is anybody there?'

A familiar face came into view: Pauley. She smiled. 'You're awake!'

'Yeah... I guess I am. What happened?'

Pauley took a deep breath, as if preparing to lecture. 'Well... you fainted. I called up the hospital right away. The ambulance came and took us off; I left a message for your Doctor, but he's never come. I've been here with you most of the time... about two days. Except for when I've been learning.'

Peri turned her head slightly, and saw that she was encased in a sort of open iron lung, like a modem-day Snow White. Aside from her head and shoulders, her entire body lay under a tight metallic shell which made a light humming noise; she assumed it was scanning her levels. There were sticky electrodes on her forehead and arms, and a thin tube snaked out from around her left wrist.

She tried to think of something to say. 'Am I sick?'

'Just a bit. The doctors say you caught a virus due to lack of immunisation. Didn't you get your shots when you came to L.A.?'

'No...' Peri thought quickly. 'It was a last-minute transfer.'

Pauley nodded sagely. 'I understand.' She bent forward and lowered her voice; a pained expression covered her features. 'I wanted to tell you: I'm sorry. Will you ever forgive me?'

'What?' Peri's memory was still rather hazy...

'The other night. In your apartment. I've learned things since then.'

Peri remembered. 'Oh.' She considered for a moment. 'You mean, you told someone?'

Pauley was taken aback. 'No, no... of course not! I learned. Haven't you had a learning session? You're level four, you must have...'

Quickly, Peri put on a remembering smile. She had no idea what Pauley was talking about, but she'd just have to wait and ask the

Doctor. Actually, she had several things to ask him... 'Of course. Sorry. I'm a little hazy right now.' She suddenly realised how empty her stomach felt. 'I'm feeling hungry,' she admitted. 'What time is it?'

'Just in time for lunch,' Pauley told her. 'Why don't we stop for Chinese on the way home? I know of some good places.'

'Okay.'

'Right.' Pauley cheered up. 'Well, I think I'll go see if the doctor will let you go now.'

'Just like that?'

'Oh, sure. Just a little bug! But he wanted you to sleep until you woke up. Rest and recuperation, you know.'

She bounded off, leaving Peri to think. What is going on here? And why hasn't the Doctor come and explained anything to me?

'I wonder,' she said out loud, 'if he even remembers I'm along for the ride.' She thought of all the adventures they'd shared; would he really leave her on her own now? Was he in some crisis of his own? Should she go after him?

The entrance of a nurse interrupted her thoughts. As the small man fussed over the needle in her arm, she found herself wondering what she'd got into...

The automatic doors to the Corporation's lobby slid apart, revealing the bookish figure of the Doctor. The laboratory coat had been left on its hook in his office, revealing the grey flannel suit and common black necktie the Doctor usually wore. For once, however, the Doctor looked tired, the tiniest hint of redness around his eyes... but his evening wasn't over.

It had been a long four days at work.

He hadn't realised how much time had passed; there were no clocks inside Corporation walls (Mr Isidore considered them a distraction), and the Doctor's natural ability to run on so little sleep had tricked him. He was worried, now, of what had become of Peri, why she wasn't trying to find him. He decided to head back to the apartment.

The Doctor walked nimbly down the street, whistling a little tune he'd once heard played on a zither in Vienna. There was no housing or restaurants near Corporation property, so this was one of the few

places the Doctor needn't expect to meet anyone or be caught in a crowd.

And that's exactly how he missed the little figure standing under the broken streetlamp.

Tarklu watched him go, following him from behind the rim of his fedora. When the Doctor's tune finally faded away, he turned to the lobby entrance of the Isidore Corporation.

'I wonder,' he whispered to himself, 'what kind of security arrangements they have in there.'

Tarklu crept into the processing room, walking on the toes of his thick boots. The receptionist had been an easy fix, as well as the main guards; Tarklu was a pro, and he let others know it.

He moved his way silently to the nearest computer bank. The processing room was dark, empty, devoid of the chaos that presided over it in the day. Squinting behind his lenses, he pressed his hand to the computer screen, as if to communicate with it. After a moment, he withdrew his hand and quickly tapped in a seven-digit code.

There was a soft noise from inside the computer, and the graphical interface unfolded to reveal a series of menus. Tarklu made his selections quickly, touching one button after another, eager to get the information he required. Closer and closer he came to his goal, until finally...

Tarklu stepped back, stunned. So that's what they were up to...

Suddenly, there was the sound of something falling on a hinge, and Tarklu whirled around. The noise repeated several times throughout the room. As one, seven robotic machineguns unfolded themselves from the wall and turned to face the sole heat signature in the room.

Tarklu threw himself to the left just in time. Puht-puht-puht-puht-puht! The computer bank sparked furiously as the projectiles found their mark, destroying thousands of dollars of equipment. Tarklu looked up in alarm at the sound of whirring servos: the guns were taking aim again.

Cells redivided and combined. Mass shifted. The entire metabolic structure of a lifeform shifted to one extreme.

The machine guns paused, clicking softly, unable to find their target.

A slimy puddle of goo started inching its way slowly to the door.

Agonisingly it moved, a centimetre here, a millimetre there, until it eventually reached the entrance. It crossed the threshold back into the corridor, gave a sudden shake... and reformed into a short, black and white animal.

'Phew!' The creature wiped its brow with its foremost appendage. 'I think I'll stick to being a private dick instead of a spy.' He rubbed his chin, considering. 'Now I wonder why the Doc's been keeping all that from me?'

Shaking out his tail feathers briskly, Frobisher moved off towards the lobby.

'I see fine dining's gone the way of the dinosaurs ' Peri walked down the pavement, Pauley at her side. There was a vague itching sensation where the needle had been in her arm, but otherwise, Peri felt all right. She just wished she felt more comfortable out in public...

'No one can afford it,' explained Pauley, 'so restaurants are mostly governed by the dominant ethnic cultures of the area. One or two deviants exist around here, for instance, but most of it is...'

'Chinese, Chinese and Chinese?' Peri finished. She assumed that Pauley had 'learned' that speech, as well; she sounded like a textbook on cassette. Peri decided to change the subject. 'What time is it?' she asked. 'It's so dark, but the streets are packed. Is there a concert or something?'

'It was ten when we left the hospital. There's a lot of nightlife in L.A., particularly Chinatown. Daytime is when everybody's at work, or at home.'

'So when does everyone sleep?' For a moment, Peri lost her friend in a crowd of the light-up umbrellas almost everyone carried. She found her again quickly, and decided to remain close by for fear of getting lost.

'The lower classes only have a few hours for rest period. They use empathiser machines for maximum use of their time... they've built a religion around them, I think.' Pauley paused, and pointed to a nearby eatery. 'What about that one? John and I have been there a few times.'

'Sure.' Peri followed her across the street, dodging the skittering, angry taxicabs. She stumbled breathlessly into the front parlour of

Chang Lee's House of Lo Mein. 'It's like a rat trap!' She turned to Pauley... and found she wasn't there.

'Pauley?' Peri called quietly. The restaurant was crowded and noisy, lit only by overhead blue neon lighting. 'Pauley?' she tried, a bit louder.

'I believe,' said an all-too-familiar voice, 'that your young friend is attempting to secure a table.'

Peri rounded on the voice, gaping in recognition at the proud features and piercing eyes hidden behind a grey flannel suit and a pair of tortoise-shell spectacles. His hair was mad, as usual, the only familiar sign of personality she could find.

'Doctor?' she asked, staring at him. 'Is that you?'

'Oh yes,' he said, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his trousers. 'It's certainly me.' He bent down to her level. 'We need to talk.'

Frobisher stood just outside Corporation grounds, one flipper metamorphosed into a small electric fan. 'Private dick rule number fifty-two,' he muttered to himself, 'dark secrets always present themselves in the heat of the night.' Gradually, he melted back into the humanoid shape of Tarklu, trenchcoat and all. 'Now where can I find some more appropriately dark secrets?'

He cast his mind back to the conversation at The Behemoth. 'Young Mr Isidore,' he mused. 'I wonder where I can get some dish on Young Mr Isidore...' Suddenly, he knew exactly where.

It scared him.

'...So you see,' the Doctor finished, 'I've been rather... engaged.'

They were grouped around a small booth in the restaurant, sharing several different Chinese dishes. The Doctor had removed his glasses, which helped Peri to recognise his features, but otherwise he remained in his business guise. 'I was very dismayed to read of your sickness,' he said, reaching across the table and patting Peri's hand. 'I found the note at the apartment, but it seems I was a bit late.

'Nevertheless,' he continued, turning to Pauley with a broad smile, 'I am confident you had the situation well in hand. Thank you, dear lady.'

Peri groaned inwardly; this was the Doctor's attempt at charm.

'No... no problem,' Pauley replied quietly. She seemed unable to turn

herself away from the Doctor's gaze. 'I just... thought I could help...'

'And so you did!' the Doctor enthused. Then he stopped, considering. 'Oh, that does remind me,' he said dourly, 'have you tried the duck? Because the chef told me...' The Doctor leaned closer to Pauley, never blinking. '...That it is almost conpletely eaten. Only a few portions are left.' He smacked his lips. 'Mmm, it's so tasty...'

'Tasty...?' Pauley whispered, transfixed.

'Yes, quite tasty.' The Doctor broke away, suddenly, and motioned at the waiter. 'Another bottle of hot mustard, please!' And to Peri: 'Would you care for some more fried rice, my dear?'

Pauley blinked twice, quickly, and started to stand. 'Excuse me.' she explained apologetically. 'I... I'd like to get some of the duck. I think I heard someone say it's nearly out.'

'Oh, really?' asked the Doctor innocently. 'I can appreciate that. I shall be going in a moment; it was good to meet you, madame.' He carefully gave Peri another serving of fried rice, despite the fact that she hadn't asked for any.

'Oh? I'm sorry to see you go.' Pauley extended her hand. 'Nice to meet you, Doctor...'

'Labyrinth.'

'Doctor Labyrinth.' She smiled pleasantly, and turned to Peri. 'I'll be right back, okay?'

'Sure.' Peri nodded, and waved to her as she left. When Pauley finally disappeared through the thick, black door, she turned on the Doctor. He was squirting mustard generously over his food. 'What was that about?'

'Hmm? Oh, the first bottle ran out.'

Peri scowled. 'You know what I mean, Doctor. "I ran into young Solomon Smith..."'

'Sullivan Smith,' said the Doctor automatically.

Peri smiled triumphantly.

Frobisher looked up at the sign over the door: Zia's Archaics and Pre-War Collectibles. Frobisher had to smile; as long as he'd known the proprietor of this shop, she'd been archaic herself... and in her time that would amount to almost forty years. He wondered what her secret

was. She was a strange old woman, mysterious and more than a bit foreboding.

He opened the door quietly, revealing a long, wide room dominated by a wooden counter. There she was, very old and probably Chinese, with yellowing teeth and an ancient comb set in her hair. When she spoke, it was in clear, silky tones that would come unexpectedly to a newcomer's ears. Frobisher expected them, and only nodded in recognition.

'Come in, boy,' she told him. She always called him boy, as if to mark his comparative youth. 'We have many things here I believe you may find interesting.'

The room was subtlely cold, like the waiting room of a hospital. There were black curtains draped over the windows, and ornate, high-backed chairs placed about the room. Antiques lay strewn across old shelves and tea-tables; a brass ouroboros doorknocker caught Frobisher's eye.

He entered, tugging his trenchcoat around him in an effort to stay warm. He walked up to the desk and returned the old woman's stare. 'I remember you. You have many... curious things.'

She nodded. 'We have many, many curious things,' she affirmed, 'all of them for sale at reasonable prices. What form does your curiosity take?'

'Secrets. An old geezer named Isidore.'

She shrugged. 'Names mean little. But secrets... we have a few.'

'Give me a wide selection.'

She bent down slowly behind the counter, and Frobisher could hear the rustling noises of a thousand ancient items being found, examined, and pushed aside. After a few minutes, the old woman stood up, a thin wooden tray in hand. There were six or seven objects scattered across it: the porcelain figurine of an angel; a flat, metal key engraved with a miniature star chart; a piece of paper covered in the dried stain of a handprint made in blood; a tiny cat badge; a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle with a single missing piece; and a long, jewel-set necklace.

Frobisher was naturally attracted to the cat badge. He reached for it, and stroked the sandstone surface between his fingers. 'It's genuine. I have a friend who would like this.'

The old woman reached out abruptly and snatched it back. 'He has enough.' Before Frobisher had time to be surprised, she picked up the necklace and dangled it in front of his nose. 'It's very pretty, isn't it? I bet you have a girl who likes pretty things. A wife, perhaps. Perfect for level four.'

'I... have a friend. She might like it.'

The woman nodded. 'I understand.'

'I doubt it.'

'A whore. Wife or lover, they are all whores in Chinatown.'

Frobisher's eyes flashed. What scared him about the woman is how much she knew. What irritated him was how much she assumed... and how often she was right. 'Don't even start on it,' he warned, rising up a little.

She shrugged and pulled the necklace back as if offended. With one hand, she absent-mindedly stroked the jewelled segments. 'She's very... sweet? Your friend. Natural beauty? Perfect adornment for the girl who needs only one piece.' She continued to stroke the beads. 'Native girl, too, but a little young for her true age.'

And this time, Frobisher did react. He had his pistol out and pointed at the old woman's head. 'What do you know?' he demanded, beginning to sweat. How could the woman know all these things? Goddess, why did he come to her?

The old woman gave him what might have been a look of pity. 'Nothing to harm you,' she said, quietly. 'But I'll tell you now: get her out while you can.'

'What?'

'Go somewhere else. Leave. Go to another world with a pink sea. The United Kingdom of seventy years ago. What if you went to Italy?'

Frobisher took a deep breath, lowered his gun, and tried to calm himself. Just a crazy old lady... just a crazy old lady... 'Look,' he said, 'I came to get help from you. I don't know how. But I'm running out of time, lady, and I've got to do something soon. Please, can't you help me?'

She smiled broadly, and extended her withered hand. The necklace was clutched within her grasp. 'Take it,' she said. 'It is what you need.'

Gingerly, Frobisher took it from her. He backed away towards the

door slowly, almost afraid to turn away from her. 'Thank you,' he told her over and over. 'Thank you.'

As he opened the door to go, he thought he saw a beam of light flash across some artefacts hung on one wall. A bunch of animal skulls, large and hideously grotesque, like the heads of some long-dead bats.

Suddenly, a thought struck him. 'Have you always lived in Chinatown?' he asked the old woman.

'Yes,' she said. 'In a sense.'

'Oh dear.' The Doctor raised his face to her, frowning in defeat. 'All right, all right, I'll admit it; you've got me. But please don't ask for any details, Peri... you really don't want to know.'

'Actually, I do!' she snapped. 'It's like a really bad round of Jeopardy. I've got all the answers, but I don't know any of the questions!'

'Well, the programme's still going. I'm sure you could pick up an episode guide with full question and answer details from -'

'Tell me!'

The Doctor put down his fork and knife slowly. He sat back in his seat, draping one arm over the rest of the bench. 'All right, then, Peri,' he replied slowly. 'What is it you wish to know?'

'Why are we here?'

He shifted uncomfortably. 'I can't tell you that, Peri. It's too important.' She started to open her mouth, but he continued. 'I trust you, Peri, really I do... but I don't trust her.' He gestured with the mustard bottle at the doorway. 'I don't trust that she won't be made to try and get it out of you.'

'Levels.'

'Levels?'

'Yeah, Doctor - levels one, two, three, four, and so on. What are they?'

'Hmm? Oh, nothing. Housing issues. Land value.'

'Doctor, if we were discussing land values, everything would get a negative number.'

The Doctor stroked his chin. 'Peri,' he told her, 'California's very different since you left. Almost... a different culture.'

'I know that already.'

'Well... in this day and age... the scientific community is very male-dominated.'

'Nothing new.'

'No, but...' The Doctor paused. 'Didn't she tell you any of this? Didn't she say anything about Sullivan Smith?'

'Her brother? Occasionally.'

'Ah.' The Doctor took a deep breath. 'Her husband, actually. You see, all the scientists are assigned a wife when they... er, the wife, I mean... reaches adolescence -'

'What!' She almost screamed it, but caught herself in time.

'Yes, well, the wives aren't really expected to be very bright. Just responsive.' He took a drink of water. 'They're expected to keep the scientists happy and content. Really a very important job. And if the wife continues to be favourable, she is allotted more rights and abilities, and therefore rises levels.' His hand twitched involuntarily. 'The watermark's unpleasant, but some of them... some of them wear it with pride.'

Immediately Peri remembered the welt on Pauley's hand. An 'A'...or was it? No. An 'I' overlapping a 'C'...

Peri exhaled angrily. 'I'm your walking, talking sex machine, then.'

The Doctor grimaced. 'Well, that's really a very crude term.' He leaned in close to Peri's face. 'You understand, don't you, mmm? It was that or be assigned one.'

'So you put me down as level four and got me a fancy wardrobe.'

'And more health coverage. I expect you don't want to wear one of those level two outfits like your friend.' He smiled placatingly. 'It's for the best. In a few weeks we'll be out of here, and you can keep the clothes.'

Peri looked him in the eye.

And then she slapped him, hard. He recoiled, holding his cheek with one hand.

'Do you really think I'm that shallow?' Peri yelled, oblivious this time to the other customers. 'I... I... I'm not your pet human!' She jumped up from her seat and stalked to the door, throwing it open.

'Peri, wait!' The Doctor sprang after her, reaching out and grabbing

her by the shoulder. She whirled around, furious. She started to say something, but he spoke over her. 'Peri, I was wrong.'

She hesitated for a moment

'I'm sorry,' he whispered. 'I should've told you all along.'

'That's right.' Peri didn't look at him.

'Let me explain. The Time Lords...'

'No, allow me. The Time Lords found out that the Isidore Corporation is doing something really bad, that interferes with the mighty laws of time, so they sent you to clear it up.'

'Well... yes. But -'

There was a sudden scream from the buffet, short and shrill. The Doctor and Peri looked at each other. 'Your friend,' the Doctor realised, already sprinting. Peri ran after him.

The Doctor got there first. The girl had collapsed near a table and lay contorting in some sort of seizure. Other people simply stepped over her body, or passed her by, oblivious to her need for help.

The Doctor crouched down beside her and rolled her over onto her back; what looked like black bruises were spreading across her arms and face, and her breathing was quick and shallow.

Peri ran to their side. 'Oh, God,' she cried, horrified, 'what's happened? Doctor, do something!' She looked up at the unaffected crowd around them. 'Won't somebody do something?'

The Doctor cradled Pauley's head in his hands. 'Call a hospital crew,' he told Peri. 'There's a telephone in the lobby.'

Peri got up to go, but the Doctor made her pause. He could see lines crawling into Pauley's face, as if she were ageing minutely as she breathed. 'Never mind that,' he told his companion. 'Call the Corporation. Get Sullivan Smith and a recall team.' He stroked the stricken girl's face with one hand, feeling the pain within her eyes. 'It may already be too late.'

Frobisher met the Doctor, Peri, Smith and the recall team as they entered the Corporation lobby. 'Doc!' he cried. 'Doc, I need talk to you about this. Why haven't you said -'

'Not now, Frobisher,' insisted the Doctor. 'We have an emergency.' He walked briskly to the lift, followed by the others. Together, they

went up to the laboratory.

Between them, the recall team members carried the almost-hysterical Pauley, now spasming, as the lines in her face grew deeper. They set her down gently on an examination table. At a sign from the Doctor, they quietly removed themselves from the scene.

'What's happening?' Smith inquired. He didn't seem particularly anxious, which Peri found odd. She was, after all, his wife.

The Doctor fussed over Peri with a handheld bioscanner. 'Definite metabolic shift,' he muttered. 'Age unstable... internal systems malfunctioning...' He snapped back to face Frobisher. 'Can't you become a containment unit?'

'Stasis?' asked Frobisher. 'Sure, but it'll take a while...' He took the necklace from his pocket and tossed it aside. Smith caught it deftly. 'Can't let that get caught in the process. One containment unit coming up.'

'It's too late. She's changing.' The Doctor turned and yelled to Sullivan Smith. 'Down the hall, fourth door on the right. Get a containment unit now!'

But Smith stood his ground, the necklace held tightly in one hand. 'She's just an experiment,' he said quietly, as if trying to persuade himself. 'Just an experiment for Mr Isidore. Just an animal...' He looked down at the floor, ignoring the others. He didn't even bother to adjust his tie.

'Come off it, man!' shouted the Doctor. 'Don't you know she's your wife?'

Smith brought his eyes up to meet the Doctor's. 'She's just an experiment,' he repeated. 'Isn't that what you told me before, about all of them?' He made a grand gesture, encompassing the lab. 'All of these are test subjects. Not one has a life of its own...'

Frobisher pushed past Smith, running to find a containment unit himself. Peri went cold. She stepped away from her group towards Smith. 'They're - they're living beings,' she said, incredulous. 'Don't you understand that? Don't you see what you're doing? You're allowing real flesh-and-blood people to die. People who've had full lives, full of love and grief and pain...'

'No,' whispered the Doctor. 'They haven't.'

Peri looked back at him questioningly.

'They're engineered by the Corporation,' he explained hoarsely. 'Growth is stimulated. Subjects are primed for planned stages of the experiment. They put drugs in their food, even.'

'Food...?' Peri had a sudden, terrible suspicion.

The Doctor caught the look on her face. 'Did you eat something of hers?' he asked. 'That explains why you became ill. You weren't properly primed; your body rejected the drug. The wives are grown to accept the drugs; the scientists are given their own drugs to absorb the effects.'

'Guinea pigs on a massive scale,' realised Peri. 'Then this is just... a stage, like you said.' Something surfaced in her brain. 'And education... that's done by machine, then, or drugs, or implants?'

'A little of it all. The Grandfather... er, the teaching machine... is a few corridors down. Weekly sessions, covering all topics.'

'My God, Doctor,' cried Peri, 'What have you done?' She turned away, unable to face him.

Frobisher returned with two low-grade technicians, balancing a containment unit between them. They set it on the ground, opened the lid, and stepped back as the Doctor lay Pauley gently down within. She convulsed as they closed the lid on her.

'That will keep her in stasis until I can attempt an operation,' said the Doctor. 'Meanwhile, I need to fmd Isidore...'

'I am already here.'

The Doctor turned to face Sullivan Smith. There was a crazy grin on the other man's face. 'You see?' he said, in the familiar reedy voice.

Frobisher gulped. 'No worries, Doc,' he told the Time Lord. 'I think your boss has just joined the party.'

Peri watched as Sullivan Smith seemed to straighten up, make himself taller. His eyes were clouded over, and one hand involuntarily twitched in an imitation of smoothing his coat out. 'I am Joshua Isidore, General Manager and Head of Research. A man... rather unlike the rest of you?'

'If you're a man, I'm a mouse,' quipped Frobisher. 'Welcome to the club.'

Isidore laughed lightly. 'Mr Tarklu, I haven't had a drink in many,

many years.'

'I didn't think so, somehow.'

'How, Isidore?' demanded the Doctor. He almost looked frightened. 'How have you done it?'

'You'd like to know.' Isidore smiled lopsidedly. 'A little tool I picked up some time ago, specially made by one of my European contacts in the industry. It's really very clever.'

'Chapel Industries?' guessed the Doctor.

'International Electromatics.'

'Ah. Yes, they might know.'

'It works-works-works-works...' Smith's head snapped back and forth, the words repeating like a broken record. '...admirably well, but, as you see? ...is not perfect. I need a new host. Permanently.'

Peri spoke up quietly. 'What happened to your old one?'

Isidore's lopsided smile returned. He tossed Frobisher's necklace playfully from hand to hand. 'In stasis. Very dead, I'm afraid.' He turned and stumbled, almost collapsing over the containment unit. 'These young ladies could help me. New bodies are... hard to come by? ...one must create them oneself. So sad that they all seem to die during the regenerative process.'

He crouched down next to the unit, crossing his legs in the lotus position. One foot twitched backwards as he spoke. 'Regeneration. The complete cellular regeneration of the human body. Very-very-very-very useful. Very marketable. I could make a fortune.' His cloudy eyes looked back at the Doctor. 'Do you know how I got like this, Dr Labyrinth?'

'I must operate on the girl, Isidore. I don't have time for this. Frobisher, give me a hand.' The Doctor took a step towards the containment unit. Isidore lashed out with one foot, catching the Doctor mid-step. He crashed down against the wall, conscious but stunned.

'I repeat, Dr Labyrinth, do you know how I got like this?'

'No,' said the Doctor through a bloodied mouth.

Isidore grinned wolfishly. He darted out at the Doctor and grabbed him by the collar. He pulled the Doctor forward and wrapped the necklace around his neck, allowing the blood from his mouth to dribble and merge with the question marks. The Doctor's eyes were clear, but

afraid...

Isidore spit out a single word.

'You.'

The Doctor winced slightly, struggling to get away, but he was tossed aside by Isidore. 'Go to hell, Time Lord. I've had enough of your time.'

Isidore twisted the necklace about the Doctor's throat like a garrotte. Frobisher and Peri rushed to help but Isidore pushed them aside as they came. 'Please...' gasped the Doctor. 'Please...'

'You have regeneration. You are the only thing left...'

'But... your... experi...'

'Don't you think I knew what would happen? Don't you think I know?'

And then the Doctor realised. He knew what Isidore had done. He knew who Isidore was.

'It's all been a game, Doctor,' Isidore confirmed. 'A game to get you back. I knew they'd send you.'

Peri cried out in horror. 'Then all these people... they're just a ploy...'

Isidore turned his face on her. 'When trapping a master chess player, one must construct an elaborate set of moves. Everyone... everything... that has come in contact with this Corporation is fodder. Fodder so I may live.' He grinned. 'Even your friend there.'

Isidore had both hands on the necklace now, twisting and cutting deep marks into the Doctor's neck. The Doctor's eyes began to cloud over...

'Neck...' the Doctor managed. '...power... transfer... please...'

Suddenly, Peri understood.

In a moment, it was over: there was a fall, a grunt, a splash. The sound of breaking glass. Frobisher was thrown aside; the Doctor caught his breath; Isidore fell to the ground. Peri held Frobisher's revolver in one hand. Her face was red in anger, but her lower lip was trembling. The necklace lay in shattered shards upon the floor; Isidore was physically untouched.

Peri lowered her eyes to the ground as the Doctor and Frobisher stood up. The Time Lord adjusted his tie slightly. 'Thank you. That was a very advanced transfer device, I'm afraid. Wherever did you get it, Frobisher?'

Frobisher shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

'Because you see, Frobisher, it allowed Isidore to reveal himself - almost the prize he couldn't resist. Otherwise, he might have taken us by surprise. But as it happened, he saw a way to gain control of my mind...' The Doctor looked to Peri. 'And you, Peri. Thank you. I couldn't have done it -'

Peri turned away. 'Help Pauley. She's the one who needs it.'

The Doctor's eyes became sad. 'Oh, Peri. I don't know if I can.'

There was nothing to be done, the Doctor knew. Already, the regeneration that would kill Pauley was set in motion. The only thing the Doctor could arrange was for her to be kept in a containment unit at the hospital, fed intravenously with essential nutrients and fluids. Her body would be almost unmoving, but he reflected that her mind would keep on going. He knew it wasn't right, that he should be able to do something more, but for once he was truly defeated.

Peri went with him to the hospital, and spent a long time alone with Pauley. They talked - or rather, Peri talked, and Pauley responded through small movements - and at the end of an hour she came out to face the Doctor and Frobisher. They were waiting together, silently.

Frobisher looked up. 'Do you think I should say goodbye?'

'I told her.' Peri spoke shortly. 'I said we were leaving.'

Frobisher nodded sullenly.

The Doctor stood up. 'If you're ready, we'll be off,' he said, but his voice remained lifeless. He turned quickly and started marching away down the corridor. Frobisher started to follow.

As they reached the end of the hall, the Doctor turned back. Peri remained just outside the hospital room, not looking at him.

'Will you come with us?' he called. 'Please?'

For a moment, Peri didn't move. Then she started towards him, taking small, slow steps. She didn't raise her head.

Together, the three of them left the hospital...and soon after, Los Angeles. Peri went straight to her room and cried. The Doctor remained by the console, wondering how he could possibly make it up to her.

'You didn't know.' Frobisher tried to comfort him.

'No,' the Doctor admitted. 'I thought Isidore was an old man, embarked on a perfectly innocent campaign. But now - I know. He did it all for me.'

'Where is he from?'

'A long time ago, Frobisher. Before you, before Peri...before this body and the last...'

'Is he dead now?'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'Oh, yes. Isidore was only human. Super-human, perhaps, in his later life.'

'Huh. And his company?'

'Perhaps the scientists will gather and use it for good.'

Frobisher nodded. 'Time heals all wounds. Isn't that what you tell us?'

The Doctor didn't answer.

It's a quiet evening in the hospital, and the night nurse is reading the latest issue of her tell-all magazine. She stops every once in a while, takes a sip of hot coffee, and contemplates how many hours and minutes and seconds she has until the end of her shift. Her shift always leads to boredom.

But not tonight. Tonight she looks over the top edge of the pages, into the face of a middle-aged man who was not there a moment before. She recognises the face; proud, intelligent, cynical, a little chubbier than the last time she saw it...

Yes, she's seen the man before, here in this hospital. His hair is curlier and blond to the point of dye, but he has the same unmistakable appearance, the same too small grey suit, and the same confident stance. It's him.

'Good evening,' he says quietly. 'I've come to visit a friend.' She starts to speak, but he interrupts. 'I know, madam. I know it's past hours, but, you see, I've got very little time and I need to pay this call.'

She realises, of course, whom he wants to see. She purses her lips, thinking. After a moment, she nods briskly. 'Room 703.'

'Thank you.' He turns and strides down the corridor, patterned coat tails flapping behind him. She watches him go, and sighs. That patient never gets visitors.

The Doctor comes up quietly on Room 703. It's dark, with a faint internal glow and mechanical whirring from a life-support shell. He steps in slowly, his hands held before him.

Within the shell, she watches him. She can barely move for all the cables and wires attached to her body, a brace holding her spine in position, the pumped nutrients making her lethargic and sleepy. They've put in an electronic reader for her, activated by such simple movements as the twitching of her nose. Sometimes she has the energy to use it.

The Doctor finds a small chair in the corner and pulls it up beside her shell. 'Hello, bright eyes,' he says softly. 'What's the story?'

She stares blankly at him, so he bends over to look for himself. 'Ah - poems by Dickinson. A nice girl, rather odd sense of humour, but a deft touch with words.' He nervously scratches the back of his neck, a trait from lifetimes before.

'I came for a reason,' he tells her, unable to look her in the eye. 'A year ago, someone gave you a promise. I've... come keep the promise.' Her right eye begins to form a tear, and he hurriedly explains. 'Peri couldn't make it,' he says quickly. 'It's not her fault, it's mine, and I'm sure if she could be here she would.'

A silent word forms on her lips: Where?

'She's married.' The Doctor looks down on the floor. 'She's married to a man twice her age in a hostile environment, and I let it happen.' His whole body sags as his mask of confidence dissolves, replaced by a true face of inward despair.

The irony is not lost on the girl. She attempts to laugh, the mucus clogs her throat; after a moment, a suction vacuum has cleared the passage, and she looks again upon the Doctor. This time, she doesn't laugh.

The Doctor contemplates. 'Would you mind if I talked to you for a time? Blink once if I may, twice if not.'

Blink.

'Do you trust me to carry out Peri's promise before I leave?'

Blink.

He hesitates. 'Do you forgive me?'

Blink blink.

'I expected as much,' he sighs. 'I shouldn't have wished for anything

more.'

There is a long silence, and then: 'You loved her, didn't you?'

Blink.

'So did I.' He shakes his head sorrowfully. 'So did I...'

At daybreak, the Doctor comes out of Room 703. His face is solemn, his strides long and regretful. He nods respectfully at the night nurse as she prepares to go, and in another minute, he too is gone.

The day nurse calls up her electronic charts and begins her rounds. Everything is running smoothly, as usual. And then she comes to Room 703.

From her position outside, the room is completely dark and silent.

A Winters Tale

ROBERT SHEARMAN

Even whifferdills grow old. Oh, you might not be able to tell. Thanks to their shape-shifting prowess, a whifferdill going through even the most tortuous mid-life crisis can transform himself into something dashing, athletic, virile - even svelte. Yes, even, at a pinch, svelte. But deep inside he knows. He *knows*. He can feel the aches and pains in his muscles as he struggles to preserve his new form - even muscles which he had never truly had in the first place. He can feel he is losing the concentration necessary to sustain his mesomorph, that all the limbs and bones and ganglions of acid larvae he has made part of his new body are just too tricky to get a grip on. And he can feel ennui - the particular despair that only a shape-shifter can feel, as it reaches the end of its life never having been entirely sure which of the thousands of lives it adopted were ever *really* real in the first place.

Avan Tarklu no longer tried to disguise the fact that he was getting old. Like all whifferdills, he had once been obsessed with his appearance - but somehow, sometime, years ago now, he had lost the slightest inclination to care. The standard shape of a whifferdill is of a small featureless head balanced stolidly on a small featureless body, with small featureless stumps sticking out at odd angles acting as impromptu arms and legs. It's not a pretty sight - and whifferdill geneticists had speculated that their shape-shifting abilities had evolved simply as a cultural need to be able to look in the mirror every morning without feeling depressed. Avan looked at his featureless body in the mirror every morning, but no longer felt depressed. His face had grown sunken and sagged with the passing years - which is very hard for a featureless face to achieve - but the sight of his ugliness no longer bothered him the way it once would have done. Avan would get up in the morning, look in the mirror, contemplate without rancour what he saw staring back at him, and get on with enduring the rest of the day until it was time to go to bed again.

Other whifferdills were vaguely disturbed by Avan Tarklu. Whifferdill mothers would tell whifferdill children that if they didn't eat their greens (or blues, or pinks - depending upon the whim of the whifferdill vegetable in question) that Avan Tarklu would come and get them. Whifferdill men would joke about Avan in whifferdill pubs whilst drinking whifferdill ale and scoffing whifferdill crisps. It wasn't so much his curious attitude towards his own appearance, though that was bad enough. It was the fact that this funny featureless little man would claim that he had once visited other worlds, fought alien monsters in other times and other spaces, and had helped save the entire universe once or twice into the bargain. This dull grey-looking creature had, he said, lived an impossible life doing impossible things in impossible ways. It made the other whifferdills feel a little... small somehow.

For most of the whifferdill year Avan was ignored, at best tolerated. But there was a short time when his oddness was welcomed. It was a time when long summer days shape-shifted into cold, dark, winter nights: when raindrops falling through the air shape-shifted into gentle white flakes. When the whole bland landscape that was the whifferdill homeworld mesomorphed itself into a place of beauty, the rivers frozen to ice, the grass covered in a blanket of snow. It was a time when the wayward imagination of a harmless eccentric like Avan Tarklu stopped being threatening, and seemed instead something wonderful and exciting. And every year the whifferdill parents would take their children to Avan's cottage, where, sitting beside a roaring fire, he would tell them some of his adventures. How he travelled with a man who could change shape (as they all could), but - wonder of wonders! - only did so at the point of death. How their craft was a small blue box which could change shape (as they all could), but - even more wondrously, most wondrous of all! - didn't.

Once a year, Avan Tarklu found that he changed. He was no longer an outcast, a hermit, a joke. He was a storyteller.

The children were due to arrive at any minute. The fire was blazing in the hearth, and Avan had prepared little cakes and sandwiches for his guests to eat as they listened to this year's epic. He had selected the tale in which he was mistaken for a god in some medieval castle - he

always thought he came quite well out of that one. He looked at himself once more in the bedroom mirror, and, as always, his featureless wrinkled face blinked back at him. Avan liked to tell his stories as an emperor penguin, because it was in this body that he had experienced most of the wonders he'd narrate. But he had realised many years ago that the effect of the tale was all the more dramatic if he changed in front of the audience, from his dull grey form into the grand bird, proud in his black feathers and long beak. The contrast between Avan now and what he had once been always made the children gasp. That Avan Tarklu had once been as impressive as this Frobisher.

Behind the closed door of the bedroom Avan heard his visitors enter one by one. He never liked to welcome them - they knew that the house would already be open, that the food would be waiting for them, that the storyteller would soon emerge. The mothers knew where to have their children sit - in many cases, these mothers had once been children themselves who had listened in awe to the fairy tales of the big talking bird. Avan listened patiently at the keyhole as they ate and warmed themselves and babbled excitedly about what was in store for them this year. It was only when they fell silent in anticipation that he knew it was time to make his entrance.

Some of the children were so young that they weren't able to mesomorph into anything more sophisticated than bare furniture. The older kids, who had listened to Avan's stories every year for as long as they could remember, were keen to show off their growing powers, and had shifted into ornate chaises longues and rocking chairs - it made Avan feel all the older when he recognised them; it had seemed only yesterday that they had been wooden stools the lot of them. The parents, of course, were a whole variety of objects and creatures, all colours, all sizes, some with knobbly bits, and some without. In deference to Avan, however, not one was shaped like a bird. No-one could do birds like Avan could. Whatever their size, whatever their shape, knobbly bits or not, all his audience leaned forward eagerly to hear Avan as he cleared his throat to begin.

'I am Avan Tarklu,' he said. 'But once upon a time the universe - yes, the whole universe - knew me as Frobisher.' And he closed his eyes to begin the shape-shift.

Years ago he would have been able to take on his penguin form in a matter of seconds without a second thought. These days it required a lot more concentration. He screwed up his face and thought of feathers, and of beak, feathers and beak, feathers and beak. It was only when he heard the groans of disappointment that he opened his eyes.

'Why aren't you a bird?' asked a little chair plaintively. 'Mamma said you'd be a bird!'

Avan looked down at his body, aghast. He hadn't changed at all. All that effort and he still looked exactly the same. He wasn't Frobisher, just the short, dull eccentric who lived on his own with no-one to talk to.

He tried again, more desperately this time. He put every thought into it, stretched every sinew. He felt muscles pop with the strain until it was too much to bear. He opened his eyes and looked out at his audience. He spoke softly, in something that sounded a little like fear.

'I can't do it. I can't do it any more.'

Avan tried to tell his story. But one by one his audience made their excuses and left. He hadn't even got to the bit where the TARDIS landed in the throne room before the whifferdills had all but disappeared from his cottage. He faltered, too embarrassed to continue, and a writing table spoke up:

'You were fun as the bird. It was only fun when you were the bird.'

Avan stopped talking. He walked away from the few stragglers who hadn't yet found a graceful way to leave, he shut himself in his bedroom - and wouldn't come out until he'd heard the last whifferdill close the front door behind him.

That night Avan couldn't sleep. Usually sleep was a refuge for him - the dreams of the past seemed so much more real to him than his waking life. But not this night. Not now. He got up out of his little bed and looked out of his little window. Already the snow was melting. It didn't matter. He knew that the children would never visit him again. Next year they'd have another holiday tradition that was more festive.

Looking in the mirror at himself he was suddenly overcome with a rage he hadn't felt in years. His face was too featureless to express rage very clearly, and to Avan it looked as if he seemed no more than

mildly peeved.

He thought of his days with the Doctor, those times when life seemed to have a real *meaning*. All those hundreds (thousands? he couldn't be sure) of planets they had visited, all those hundreds (thousands? who could tell any longer, they all blurred into one) of adventures they had had together. It had seemed to Frobisher - Avan - no, Frobisher, definitely Frobisher - that he and the Doctor had been best friends, that they would travel forever. He'd known, of course, that there were companions before him - but he hadn't thought about what that had meant until...

Why had the Doctor abandoned him? Back home, of all places? Had he simply grown tired of Frobisher, and wanted another companion? Had he wanted a change?

I was a shape-shifter! thought Frobisher. I could have been any companion you wanted! All you had to do was ask!

He wondered where the Doctor was now. Whether he'd travelled with more companions since him. Whether he'd tired of them too.

Avan shut his eyes and thought of Frobisher again. He screwed his eyes tight, and thought of Frobisher. But not this time of feathers and beak. But of the Doctor, and of the TARDIS. Of the Cybermen, and the Ice Warriors too. Of the hairy Grinth from the planet Grark which had wanted to eat the universe whole. Of that time he'd been to a shape-shifting convention and was mistaken for a Zygon warlord, oh yes, that had been funny...

He realised with some astonishment that he was laughing. And yet the pain... the pain was... he felt his limbs snap, he felt his bones crack and distend. And he could hear his own laughter as some warped background to it all.

Avan Tarklu opened his eyes. He looked in the mirror and saw Frobisher staring back at him. He was Frobisher once more - an emperor penguin, a *royal* penguin - and he knew it was for the last time. And it wasn't for the children who had once delighted in his stories. And it wasn't even for the Doctor, no, not any longer. He was Frobisher for himself.

And he noticed with some curiosity that a large tear was welling up

in his left eye. He watched it as it detached itself, ran freely down his face and splashed on to the long curve of his beak. But for the life of him Frobisher couldn't work out whether he was crying for the very pain caused by this final shape-shift or whether it was because he had lost so much else besides.

Rock and a Hard Place

Mike Tucker

26th May 2000

The heavy doors of the prison lurched open and Brent's old Volvo rolled out onto the driveway, gravel crunching under the tyres. The sky was dark and brooding over the moorland, the last vestiges of the setting sun turning the clouds as purple as the heather. The first heavy drops of rain began to splash on the windscreen and with a curse, Brent snapped on the headlights and wipers and swung the battered old car out onto the road.

The car accelerated away, rainwater hissing around the wheels, and the prison was soon nothing but a low grey shape in the rear view mirror. Brent struggled out of his uniform jacket, one hand clenched on the steering wheel. Hauling his cigarettes from the pocket, he abandoned the jacket to the back seat and punched at the cigarette lighter.

The rain came harder now, streaming off the wipers, beating a steady tattoo on the roof of the car. In the distance the lights of Blackcastle gave a sick yellow sheen to the clouds, the town itself picked out in the valley in dots of lurid yellow. Brent grunted. A sick town.

The cigarette lighter pinged out of its socket and he pulled it free, stabbing it at the end of the cigarette between his lips. He sucked hard and blew a cloud of blue smoke into the car. He needed a drink.

He glanced in the rear-view mirror at the crumpled uniform jacket on the back seat. The rock was in the inside pocket. He could feel it. Sense it. If he concentrated – really concentrated – he could hear it speaking to him, telling him what it wanted.

The harsh metallic rattle of a cattle grid snapped his attention back to the road. The scrub and bracken of the moorland began to give way to the outskirts of the town; the council estates that had sprung up in the seventies. Brent hated the estates at the best of times but at night,

bathed in the yellow glow of the sodium lamps they took on a nightmarish quality. Stopped at traffic lights, he watched as a crowd of youths splashed past, their clothes soaked, their hair plastered to their heads.

'Yobs.' Brent hissed under his breath.

The lights changed and Brent powered the car down the hill into town sending a sheet of water over the crowd. He smiled as their curses faded into the night. Yobs. Deserved all that they got.

The centre of Blackcastle was quiet. Weekdays never brought many out, wet weekdays even less. Why waste money on a lousy evening out when there was Friday night and the weatherman's promise of sunshine?

Brent pulled the Volvo into a parking space on Vine Street and stepped out into the rain, the slamming of the car door echoing around the near empty streets. He hauled a battered leather jacket from the back seat and shrugged it on. The prison officer was gone now, part of another life. Now there was just him and... the rock.

He hesitated for a moment, staring at the back seat of the car, then he reached into his jacket pocket.

The rock was cool and smooth in his palm, droplets of rain seeming to slide off it without really touching it. His palm tingled and his brow furrowed with concentration as the rock spoke to him. Brent turned. The beat of drums and babble of conversation drifted from the pub opposite.

Brent cocked his head on one side, listening.

'Yes, yes, all right...'

Flicking his cigarette butt into the gutter Brent slid the rock into his trouser pocket, crossed the street and pushed open the pub door.

Despite the rain and midweek lull 'The Bull' was crowded; students mostly, nothing seemed to stop them coming out. The air was blue with smoke, the CD jukebox cranked up to top volume. Brent shouldered his way through the throng to the public bar, cursing. 'The Bull' had used to be a favourite haunt of his before the big breweries had moved in, with their poncy bottled beers and their slick menus.

He pushed past a crowd nestled next to the bar. One of them turned to say something but Brent glared at him and the group slunk away,

muttering to themselves.

The barman Brent knew from the old days, somehow he had survived the takeover. The rest of the barstaff were children – and foreign. Why was it that bar staff were always Aussies? A pint glass of bitter thumped down in front of him: he hadn't even needed to bother to order. That was how a pub ought to be run. Know your customers. Keep things small and local. Brent nodded his thanks, tossed the money onto the sodden bar top and turned back into the pub.

The drums on the jukebox stepped up a notch. Brent's head was beginning to pound. There was nowhere in the pub to sit so he leaned against one of the pillars in the centre of the room. He took a long gulp of beer and let his eyes wander over the crowd.

Even with the weather as foul as it was most of the kids were dressed as if it was summer. Girls in short skirts and crop tops, boys in loose silk shirts. Brent snorted. They were always pleading poverty when it came to paying rent or bills but they seemed to be able to find the brass when they needed some fine new clothes. Boys stood in groups like pack animals, bottles clasped in their hands, their eyes flickering over the women that paraded through the crowds. In darker corners couples sat with their arms draped over each other, trying to whisper things to each other over the din of the music. Brent took another gulp of his pint. The girls might giggle and protest, but they knew what they were after, they just wanted to get choosy about it. The guys probably didn't give a toss what the bird was like, as long as they ended the night with someone. Anyone.

Brent finished his drink and pushed back to the bar. The pub was stifling now; he could feel his tee shirt sticking to him. A girl tried to squeeze past him, two beers clasped in her hands, her breasts scraping along his chest. Brent stared down at her, smiling as he watched her flush with embarrassment. She wouldn't meet his gaze. He could have leaned back, given her some room, but he preferred to wait for her to struggle past him. Brent watched as she pushed way back over to a group by the door. One of the guys looked up and glowered at him. Ignoring him Brent ordered another pint and resumed his position in the centre of the bar.

The ebb and flow of people continued, some dashing out into the

night, others arriving and taking their place. The noise was a blur now, Brent couldn't distinguish music from talk. The beer softened the edges of everything, blended it together.

He let his hand drift down to the cool stone in his pocket. He could feel it throbbing, pulsing, urgent with need. He had only had it a couple of days but he couldn't imagine being without it now, couldn't bear the thought of it not being there, nestled in the corner of his thoughts, warming, comforting.

He let his mind drift back to the weekend, to the eclipse. The papers had been full of bullshit about the stars and the future – more so than usual. Brent hated that stuff at the best of times. New age crap. But this time they had been right. The stars had given him something...

The rocks had begun falling as soon as the first edge of blackness had begun to edge across the face of the sun, little more than lumps of gravel, hissing as they burnt up in the atmosphere. Some had splashed into the estuary – and one had smashed through the prison greenhouse.

The inmates had cheered at that. Anything that caused trouble was welcomed. Brent hadn't thought anything of it. He had got Norris to go and clear it up. Then the spooks from UNIT had turned up. Three of them. A blonde haired poof, a kid in a school uniform and a loud mouthed Aussie bitch.

Brent snorted, the bird had been a looker but he hadn't even got a smile out of her. Fag Hag.

They'd poked around the prison garden for an hour or more then questioned Norris and the other inmates. Hadn't got anything of course. Didn't have the right approach. After they'd gone Brent had conducted an enquiry of his own. It hadn't taken him long to persuade Norris to show him what he had hidden. To show him the rock.

Goosebumps ran down Brent's spine as, he recalled his first touch of that strange lump of cold rock, of the pleasure that it had given him. Norris had whimpered and pleaded with him not to take it, but a few well-placed blows had given him something else to whine about.

Brent had taken the rock back to his office and it had started to whisper to him, to promise him so much. And then that night, after he had given it what it had asked for...

He began to shiver in anticipation. He was on his third pint now, his gaze drifted back to the girl who had pushed past him earlier. She was draped over some faceless moron – they all looked the same in their colourful shirts and styled hair. As Brent watched he saw his hand drop onto her backside. The boy bent down and kissed her. Brent took another swig of beer. Boy like that wouldn't last two minutes inside. Looked too much like a girl. Thin face. Girls lips.

Brent's eyes narrowed as the two pulled each other closer. He could see the girl's hands running up under the boy's shirt, caressing his chest, he imagined her mouth on his, tasting the beer and tobacco. They seemed oblivious to the rest of the pub, locked in a world of their own. The boy would do. He would gladly let the rock have him. The girl's eyes suddenly opened and stared into his.

She suddenly pulled away from her boyfriend; Brent could see her say something to him. The boy spun, his face pinched with anger, and began pushing his way through the pub. Brent could feel the rush of excitement. The boy was going to have a go!

Moments later the lad was up in front of him, his face inches away.

'Are you some kind of pervert or something?'

Brent could hear the cracks in the boy's voice. He raised his glass to his lips, saying nothing.

'I'm talking to you, granddad!'

Brent raised his head and stared at the boy.

'Why don't you just piss off now, son. I'm sure your tart is very impressed but I doubt she will be when you're flat on your back trying to hold your face together.'

Brent went to raise his glass again when it was dashed from his hand. The boy was shaking with anger. 'I've had it with tossers like you.'

He went to swing a punch, but Brent caught his arm and twisted. There was a harsh crack and the boy went down screaming.

Immediately there was uproar. The boy's mates surged forward, the high-pitched shrieks of girls cut through the music. Brent could feel the tide of people part as the bouncers surged in from the door. He could feel blows raining down on him, ineffectual and weak. His own hands were now clenched into massive fists, clubbing down anyone who

came near him. Furniture toppled and there was the crunch of glass underfoot.

The rock was screaming in his brain, fuelled by the blood on his knuckles it urged him to do more, urged him to maim, to tear, to kill.

Brent forced himself to concentrate.

'No! Not here! Too many...'

Suddenly he felt heavy arms pulling him backwards and he was thrust out into the sudden cold of the night. One of the bouncers twisted his arm up behind his back and hissed in his ear.

'Piss off home, old man. We don't need your kind in here.' Brent felt a boot on his back and he was pushed down into the street. He rolled upright, glaring back at the bouncer. For a moment he considered wading back in, but that could mean Police, and the Governor wouldn't like that, not one of his own men banged up.

Brent wiped his lip and spat a gobbet of blood into the gutter. The rain had settled into a fine drizzle now. He watched the blood dilute for a moment then pulled the collar of his jacket up and wandered towards the other end of town.

'Never liked that damn pub anyway.'

The town was flush with pubs and Brent wandered from one to another, downing a couple of pints and then moving on. Everywhere was the same story, students, youngsters. No one suitable. No one for the rock.

The warm glow from the rock had become a dull ache, like a migraine, gnawing at the back of his skull.

It was late now. The pubs were just starting to chuck out. A steady stream of people staggering onto the streets, shouting and jeering, singing half-wit football anthems. He hauled his cigarettes out of his pocket. The drizzle had stopped but wind had sprung up, He struck a match into life, but the flame flickered out before he could raise it to his lips. He ducked into an alleyway, cupping his hands around the dancing flame.

The cigarette caught and he leaned against the wall, the beers he had had straining against his bladder. Ducking deeper into the shadows Brent undid his flies and had a piss, urine splashing against the wet

brick.

A noise from further along the alleyway made him look up. There was a giggle. He could see figures in the harsh yellow of the sodium lamps. Brent crept over to the big industrial wheeliebins thrust into a tangle against the wall and peered around them.

Two figures were entwined by the wire fence at the end of the alley; hazy silhouettes, their heads moving together. Brent could hear the wetness of their kisses.

The rock began to pulse again, filling his brain with thoughts, desires. The pressure in his skull threatened to overwhelm him. The cigarette dropped from his fingers. He leant forward, gasping and the bins clattered forward.

The two figures started. 'Who's there?'

Brent ground his hands into his temples. 'No, this is wrong they're children! Children!'

There was the splash of feet in the puddles. Two teenagers raced past him as he struggled to stay on his feet. He could hear a girl sobbing.

Brent lit up another cigarette and staggered out of the alleyway. The rock nagged at him, urgent in its need now. Brent felt waves of nausea flood over him and he nearly fell. If he didn't give it what it needed soon...

The queues were forming outside the clubs, but Brent ignored them. He needed somewhere quieter, somewhere where fewer questions were asked. He crossed into a dark passage, heading towards the dock development. In the gloom he could see a light and hear drums and music.

The doorman watched as Brent paid his ten pounds, then hauled the door open for him. The music was louder now, pounding. Brent climbed the old wooden stairs and pushed open the doors to the club.

The bar was full and thick with smoke, a dozen heads turned as the door opened, eyes looking him up and down as he made his way over to the bar. Clubs like this were rare in this part of the world; the ones that did open were rarely quiet. Brent had been here once or twice. He wasn't a regular. He usually got his pleasures elsewhere.

He pulled a wad of notes from his pocket and peeled one off,

placing it down on the bar. The barman looked at him expectantly. Brent nodded at the bottles at the back of the bar. 'Jack Daniels. Ice.'

He watched as the golden liquid splashed into the glass, took it, then wandered down the club, heading for the stage.

A dozen tables were strewn at the front of the stage, old and mismatched, evidence of too little money being spent on the surroundings. Most of the tables were empty, whereas the dark corners of the bar full with intertwined shapes. Brent slid into a chair, nursing his drink.

Abruptly the pounding of the jukebox stopped and a pale spotlight picked out the faded curtain at the back of the stage. At one side a saxophonist started to play and the curtain parted.

The figure that weaved across the stage was a parody of womanhood, the red dress tight around the hips, the lips impossibly red. When she began to sing the voice was an octave lower than any woman that Brent had ever heard. Lost in the world of his whisky Brent let the sleazy song drift around him.

The area around the stage was crowded now, catcalls and jeering surrounded him. The red dress on the stage weaved in front of him, a blur. Brent drained the last of his whisky, throwing his head back. When he looked back at the table there was someone opposite him.

The man was thick set, bald, his shaven head glinting under the spotlights. A thick moustache sprouted from under his nose. He stared at Brent. The singer finished his number, to sporadic applause and shouted obscenities. The man the other side of the table didn't take his eyes from Brent's.

Slowly and deliberately he shrugged off his shirt and let it drop to the floor. He was bare chested, heavily muscled, the veins standing out like ropes on his arms. Brent didn't drop his gaze from the man's eyes. The club was going silent now, all eyes slowly coming to rest on the two men staring at each other across the shabby table.

The singer tried to launch into another number but no one paid him any heed. Swearing loudly he vanished through the faded velvet curtain.

The man opposite Brent placed his arm on the table, elbow firmly planted palm open, an obvious challenge. Brent let his leather jacket

drop to the floor, aware of the eyes on his back, conscious of the gasps of admiration that he prompted. His tee shirt was still wet with sweat and rainwater.

He shuffled his seat forward and grasped the other man's hand, feeling the roughness of his palm.

At some unspoken signal the two of them began to exert pressure, harder and harder. Their arms began to strain, muscles bulging, flesh quivering. Money began to change hands across the bar and slowly a beat began to build a steady handclap as the two men pushed harder and harder against each other.

Brent could feel sweat beading on his forehead, on the palm this opponent. He gritted his teeth, the pain was beginning to build, a slow ache in his muscles as the force in his forearm increased.

The crowd was chanting now, urging the two men on, the handclap getting faster, and faster, and faster.

The rock pulsed against his thigh, the pressure in his head was unbearable. Yes, it screamed. This is the one! This is the one! Brent tried to shut it out, Tried to shut out the image of what would soon come and to concentrate on his reward when it was over.

Brent felt a roar building in his chest and let it out, bellowing his defiance. With a monumental effort he slammed his arm forward and the table splintered, the other man crashing from his seat.

The club erupted into cheers. Brent felt a hand on his back. The saxophonist started up again, but the singer was slumped in disgust at the bar, vodka in hand.

Brent held out his hand and hauled his wrestling partner to his feet. Unspeaking he turned to the door and the two of them vanished into the rain.

Brent drove in silence, watching the streetlights fade to nothing in the rear view mirror. His companion sat silent in the dark beside him, his breathing harsh and expectant. Brent turned into the docks and turned the lights off, letting the big Volvo roll silently under the towering cranes.

The wind was blowing strong now, salt from the sea speckling the windscreen. Brent turned along one of the service roads and let the car

coast to a standstill in the shadow of a huge container, poised to be hoisted onto a freighter in the morning.

He hauled the door open and stepped out into the cold night air. The other man slid out of the passenger seat and crossed to the dockside, leaning on the railings looking out over the docks. Brent stood behind him, he could sense the man's anticipation, could feel him waiting for something to happen.

Abruptly Brent stepped forward, grasping the man's wrist and pulling his arm out straight. He fumbled in his pocket, pulling out the rock, forcing it into the big man's outstretched palm.

The man stared down at the smooth stone, puzzled, then his mouth snapped open in a soundless scream of agony. The rock began to swell, to surge outwards, its surface folding in impossible directions. Cold stone engulfed the man's fist and there was a harsh crunch, like a pistol shot across the dock.

Brent stepped back, terror and fascination flickering across his face. The rock continued to warp and twist, its victim collapsing to his knees. With a hungry burbling the rock engulfed him. Brent got a brief impression of rows of teeth, of ribboned flesh, then the rock clattered to the floor.

The silence was deafening.

Brent approached the rock. It was bigger now, bloated.

He reached out tentatively. The migraine was gone. There was just warmth.

As Brent's fingers touched the stone sensations flooded through him. Pleasure. Warmth. Tranquillity.

He gripped the rock tightly as the feelings surged through his body. He felt his knees buckle, and almost cried out.

He fell to the wet dockside panting, his breath heavy. The rock pulsed in his brain, pleased with him. Satisfied. Reeling, he clambered to his feet and began to drift back towards his car, his eyes dreamy, his walk slow and weaving.

He slumped into the driver's seat of the old Volvo exhausted. The moon was high in the night sky, brilliant and silver, not the dark, malevolent shape that had crept across the face of the sun two days ago. Brent placed the rock on the passenger seat and started the

engine.

It was four in the morning by the time that Brent finally pulled up at his terraced house on the outskirts of Blackcastle. He turned the Volvo onto the drive and turned the engine off, listening to the engine tick quietly in the cold night air. Hauling his uniform jacket off the back seat, he struggled out of the car and tottered over to the front door, fumbling with his keys.

The front room was lit by the soft glow of the fish tanks. Brent let his hand rest on the cool glass for a moment, watching the fish drift beneath his fingers. He pulled out the rock and let it slip into the cool water of the fish tank, watching it settle on the bottom, surrounded by weaving plants. The fish swirled away from it, clustering at the far side of the tank. Brent watched them for a moment, then he tossed his jacket onto the sofa and stumbled up the stairs towards his bedroom.

In the glow from the streetlights he could see the shape of his wife under the covers. He hauled off his boots and trousers and tried to slip under the covers quietly. His wife groaned and rolled to one side. 'It's late.'

Brent grunted, his head swimming the warmth in his brain making him muzzy. He reached out for her, his hands clumsy. She slapped him away. 'You're drunk.' Her voice was weary. Too tired to argue, Brent slumped back onto the bed, his head lolling, waves of pleasure still flooding through him. The death of the man nagged at the edge of his consciousness, but the rock had told him that everything was going to be all right. Moments later his snores reverberated around the small bedroom, his wife clamping the pillow over her ears, trying to shut him out.

Downstairs the kitchen door opened and three figures slipped into the quiet of the lounge, shadows cast from the fishtank lights huge on the walls. One of them crossed to the lounge door and gently opened it, peering up the stairs. The sound of Brent's snoring echoed around the house.

'He's asleep, Doctor. Sound asleep by the sound of it.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Well, keep watch, Turlough. This won't take

long.'

He waved at the other figure. 'Tegan, bring that case over, would you?'

Tegan crossed to the fishtank, struggling with the heavy metal case. 'Are you sure this is safe, Doctor?'

The Doctor closed his eyes. 'Of course it's not safe. That's why I need the case.'

He snapped open the clasps and pulled out a pair of heavy black gloves, hauling them on over the arms of his frock coat, then he slipped on his half moon spectacles and peered into the tank.

The rock sat amongst the weeds. Tegan bent down, her head next to the Doctor's. 'Are you sure that's it? It doesn't look like anything much.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Oh, yes, that's it.' He frowned, his head on one side, as if listening.

Abruptly he stood up, snatching the glasses from his nose, his face flushed with anger.

'It's killed again. Recently.' He paced the lounge. 'I should have found it sooner!'

Turlough waved his hands at them. 'Quiet!' he hissed. 'You'll wake him!'

The Doctor glared at him. 'After what that man has done...'

Tegan caught his arm.

'I thought you said that he would have had no choice...'

The Doctor turned to argue, then took a deep breath. 'No. No you're quite right, Tegan. A stronger mind might have resisted, but a man like Brent...' He shook his head. 'Come on.'

He crossed back to the fishtank, reaching into it for the rock, frightened fish swirling around his arms. He scooped it up in a gloved hand and gingerly carried it over to the case, shooing Tegan out of the way.

The case was lined with flickering electronics, a spherical chamber linked by fine, hair-like wires. The Doctor slipped the rock into the spherical casing. As it did so it gave a sudden horrible burble. Tegan jumped back, and for a moment the case was filled with shining teeth. The Doctor punched at a button and with a sharp hiss the case

snapped closed. He let out a deep sigh.

'It's over.'

Turlough crossed to his side. 'Can we go now?'

The Doctor nodded. 'We'll dump this a long way away.'

'Will there be more of them?' Tegan's voice was concerned, her eyes fixed on the case.

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, no there shouldn't have been any after the planet broke up, but sometimes life survives against all odds, even evolutionary aberrations like this.'

He hefted the case up into his arms.

'Come on. I've had enough of here.'

He crossed back towards the kitchen and the waiting TARDIS. Tegan took a look back up the stairs, grimacing at the reverberating snores. 'Will he be all right, Doctor? None of this was his fault, really.'

The Doctor didn't look back. 'The loss of the telepathic connection will be hard for him to get over. He's in for an unpleasant few days, but it will be nothing compared to the guilt of what he's done when his memory finally reasserts itself.'

He paused. 'There is nothing I can do, Tegan. Nothing that will make this any better. Two people have died because I wasn't quick enough. Two people have died because that man wasn't strong enough, now I just want to be gone.'

He vanished inside the TARDIS.

Tegan watched him go. Turlough reached out for her. 'Come on, Tegan. There's nothing more we can do here.'

Tegan took one look up the stairs. Then nodded and followed Turlough into the TARDIS.

A grinding wheezing roar reverberated around the depths of Brent's dreams. A nightmare of aching, wrenching loss that shook him from his sleep. When he finally awoke he knew that the rock was gone, and that he was more alone than he had ever been before.

When his wife awoke she found him sitting in front of his fishtank crying like a baby.

Fitz Kreiner and the Onion of Doom

STEPHEN COLE

Fitz Kreiner was friends with Otto Werner for three reasons. Firstly, Otto had a smart reel-to-reel recorder and a natty microphone to go with it. Secondly, Otto was a musician; not a very good one, but he was passionate about drums and impressed with Fitz's own natural affinity with musical instruments, which Fitz found endearing. And thirdly, Otto was well in with the boss of the stock music library on Charlotte Street, Davin Bryceson, and frequently recorded the odd track for him. The very odd, discordant track, usually. These were swiftly snapped up by TV producers desperate to find just the right musical backdrop for the slime mines of planet Zog, or whatever. The money wasn't awful no matter how crap the music might be.

So it suited Fitz to be friends with Otto Werner. Even today, April 13th 1961, they were down in Otto's cellar breathing the damp sawdust stink and pot fumes, laying down numbers. Otto would thump his bongos in a suitably avant garde (i.e. rubbish) manner, getting gradually more and more stoned, and Fitz would humour him by adding some discordant guitar. After a few such tracks, Otto would be unconscious and Fitz could nick a couple of reels and put down a proper tune with his acoustic. Italian Tony down Camden would doubtless listen to it with his 'so-what' expression, but Fitz knew that one of these days Tony would be blown away. It was just about finding the right so

Otto had his eyes closed, beating out a ponderous rhythm on his bongos, his goitre quivering with every strike. Transfixed by the sight, Fitz let his finger slip on his bass's fretboard, and there was a twanging buzz.

'Yes, Fitz, yes!' Otto yelled, his girlish voice resounding round the eight by eight room lit by its single bare bulb visible through the haze of

pot smoke. 'It's raw, desolate, do again!'

Fitz stared at him dourly and stopped playing, pointing to the microphone picking up Otto's bongos. 'Loud mouth,' he mimed.

Otto's fat face fell and he reached over and turned the knob that stopped recording. Then he brightened, his cheeks flushing. 'Good. I'm glad we had to stop that one. It was a bit bish. We hang the next song round that fret buzz. It's...' His face was solemn. 'It's so authentically alien. It's for real. Fitz, you're a genius. Davvers will snap these up.'

'Davvers?'

'Davin, the music library man.'

If only Italian Tony was as fussy, Fitz thought. Then again, Otto was seeing the world in a particularly mellow light right now.

They resumed their discordant work, take after tortuous take. Otto invented stupid names for each piece like 'Sidereal Meteoroids' and 'Fearful Universe'. Fitz dutifully twanged strings at random while Otto got increasingly loose with his bongos.

Finally Fitz slid his finger down to the bottom F on his E string and left the note ringing.

'Perfect,' Otto said as he turned off the tape. 'By way of celebration, have a bang on this number, man.' The words sounded ridiculous in his posh high-pitched voice, but his face was comically earnest as he held out the joint. Then he giggled. 'A bang on the toke I mean, not the drum.'

Fitz shook his head. 'Nah. I know where it's been, thanks.'

Otto nodded. Then suddenly he slumped back on a beanbag and his head fell back, chins wobbling like blancmange.

Fitz shook his head in silent wonder. Then, checking Otto was out for the count, he changed the tape spool and started tuning up his battered acoustic.

The next day, Fitz ran into Otto coming down the Tottenham Court Road.

'This is a real stroke of luck,' Otto said, obviously taken in by Fitz's forced smile.

Yeah, bad luck, thought Fitz, the only kind he ever got. 'What do you mean, Otto?'

'I mean I'm off to see Davvers at the library,' Otto said happily, patting the scruffy satchel round his neck. 'With our latest masterpieces.'

Fitz had himself just come from another fruitless trip to Italian Tony. 'You got dreams, don't you Kreiner?' Tony had observed between puffs on a Camel, gut bulging over his tight jeans as he sat on a tea chest in the back room of the Music Cow. The Music Cow wasn't just a good place to get cheap 78s; Tony had a vinyl-cutting system out in the back which he used to put out singles of local groups. Everyone seemed to get onto disk except him.

'I only listen to your rubbish 'cuz you got dreams,' Italian Tony had continued. 'But I'll tell you fair: you can flush them hopes down the Benghazi, son. It's the same with all your stuff: too square for the kids but too hip for the squares.'

'The square hipsters is a massively untapped market,' Fitz had said hopefully.

'Ain't nothing selling these days, anyway. Nothing. No money in this game. You wanna do something for old Bryceson down the music library. Gold mine, that place, I reckon. Yeah, that Bryceson, he's a lucky sod. He gets fat on the good life. Me, I gotta eat cheap pasta.'

Fitz reflected on how much he'd love to be in Italian Tony's scuffed winkle-pickers. Seemed everyone wanted something they couldn't have. But at that point, Italian Tony had sauntered off to noisily use the Benghazi himself, and Fitz had decided perhaps it wasn't polite to wait around and listen to the sound of your dreams going down the pipes.

But hey, on the bright side, Davin Bryceson would buy another heap of improvised rubbish knowing some kiddie show on a Saturday afternoon would snap it up. Still, it was worth a few bob, he supposed -- and if Davvers was as enthusiastic as Otto made out, well, a few positive strokes certainly wouldn't go amiss.

Fitz loped along beside Otto, who was chuntering on about nothing much as usual in his affected public school gangster way. Otto had spent almost as much of his childhood as Fitz getting the crap kicked out of him for his Kraut parentage and pudginess. But whereas Fitz lapsed into many characters to fit in with the crowd, Otto had specialised in just one - that of a posh kid full of Eastend bunny, so

obnoxious it had earned him almost as many kickings as his long-forgotten 'normal' self. Still, live and let live was Fitz's motto. It was just a shame that living was something he could only dream about. He felt he was eking out an existence, nothing more.

He looked around at the sooted brickwork of Furnival Street, at the fart-under-your-nose expression everyone wore like a mask as they passed by, at Anglias and Clubmans chuttering out stinking exhaust like big clouds of cold breath. There had to be something more to life than this, something better waiting. Maybe those Saturday kiddie shows had the right idea... journeying into the stars... finding somewhere new...

Otto's voice rose a pitch and broke into Fitz's thoughts. 'Fitz, you crafty old bandit,' he burbled. 'That girl's giving you the eye and then some. You're in there! Either that or she's on the Hoist and looking for a john.'

'That's no tart,' Fitz hissed and felt automatically for the cigarettes in his long coat pocket. It was her. The Girl. The one with the wiggle in Highgate. And she *was* looking at him, a real smouldering expression. He'd seen her around several times, observed her and lusted after her. Not that she'd ever have guessed; he'd always kept a discreet distance. She'd been his muse on several interesting solitary evenings in. She was tall and thin, dressed today in a long brown coat and a crimson headscarf that made her already pale face practically a blinding white. And now here she was coming up the street, looking his way and like she meant business - though probably not the business Otto was insinuating.

Actually, she didn't look happy at all.

'Stop following me about, you pervert!' the girl yelled into his face. 'I'm sick of it!'

The fag fell from Fitz's mouth as he gaped in amazement. He'd never imagined he'd see her this close up, but the overall effect was less erotic than he'd hoped. 'But I wasn't, I... It's a coincidence!'

'My boyfriend's in the Congo right now,' the girl shouted, 'but when he gets back he'll do you.'

People in the street were stopping and staring. Otto was giggling. Fitz was bright red. It was time for a comeback.

'Congo, huh? Does he get on with the other gorillas?'

The girl wasn't laughing. Actually, Fitz realised, 'gorillas' was a poor choice of monkey-insult because she might've thought he meant the perfectly feasible 'guerrillas', and that he was just trying to make conversation and -

She shoved him into a fruit and veg stand.

Fitz fell on his bum in a shower of not-all-that-fresh produce, which rolled all over the road. The girl stormed off, justice done. The stall owner was yelling abuse at him, and Otto was piling potatoes and tomatoes and whatever else into his satchel, winking a 'nice one!' at Fitz as if he'd planned it this way all along.

The day had to improve, Fitz decided. Rejection was rubbish. It just wasn't fair that his thoughts of the Girl had to go join his pop star aspirations drowning in the pipes. The day *had* to improve.

Right.

Sitting uncomfortably in Davin Bryceson's poky waiting room on a cracked leather chair and tapping his foot on a threadbare carpet, Fitz stared at the impresario's dowdy office door and wished it was like the magic wardrobe in Narnia, that it would lead him into a fantastic land of adventure.

'He keeps a bedpan in there,' Otto confided knowledgeably. 'Hates getting up unnecessarily, does old Davvers.'

'Nice,' Fitz remarked.

There was a deep moan of insensate despair from behind the door.

'Got anything else in there, has he?' Fitz wondered with a degree of alarm.

'You'll ruin me, you cow! You'll ruin me!' Davvers was clearly not a happy camper, his voice was rough enough to sand down timber. 'Why are you doing this to me? I oughta kill you for this, before you kill me!'

'Very nice,' Fitz observed, getting up. 'Well, think I'll be off.'

'No, no,' said Otto. 'He gets like this, doesn't mean anything by it. It's his wife, see. Old Dowers had a badger job done on him.'

'Talk English, Otto for Christ's sake,' Fitz said wearily.

'You know,' Otto said. 'Snap, snap. Photos. Him and some young boy, some sort he's fixed up with a drum in High Barnet. Anyway, some

faces put the squeeze on him for a bit of regular poppy, and when he stops paying, they shows the pix to his old lady.' Otto cackled. 'She's getting more out of him than the villains ever could, poor old sod.'

Fitz frowned. 'I think my sympathies lie with her. How come you know so much about this?'

Otto shrugged casually. 'The boy lives round the corner from me. Nice lad. Anyway, he told me everything. Nasty business. Driven poor old Davvers a bit diddlo,' Otto added, tracing a finger in a circle by his ear.

'Don't think I don't know what's going on, you bitch!' poor dear old Dowers said. 'Who's put you up to this. It's them, isn't it? Them! Oh, don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about...'

'He sounds like a maniac,' protested Fitz.

With a loud *ching!* the phone slammed down in its cradle. 'You know all right... And I know, too. They've got to you... got to you...'

'Bit diddlo,' Otto said with a shrug. 'That's all.'

He got up and knocked on the door.

The only answer was a long pause.

'Mr Bryceson?' Otto asked tentatively. Then he caught Fitz's suspicious eye and cleared his throat. 'Davin, it's Otto. I've got some dynamite stuff for you, which I think you're going to be very interested in.'

'Otto?' Bryceson's voice was hoarse. 'Is it you? Are you alone?'

'No, I've come with my top collaborator.'

Fitz winced inwardly at such a description.

'All right, then.' A long pause. 'Come in.'

Otto beamed at Fitz with pride, and led the way in.

Once inside the office, Fitz revised his opinion of where his sympathies lay on the badger job issue: now they resided with whoever had been made to take the photos. Dear old Dowers wasn't a handsome man. He was big, sweaty and had a whiskey-and-piss stink about him (the bedpan? Fitz couldn't locate the item and decided not to pry any further). His red face was pockmarked and set off with a ripe strawberry nose. His eyes bulged in a fair imitation of his waistline, and he wore a wig so poor it was more like a dead skunk draped over his

bonce. His desk was a right state too, all invoices and coffee-rings ranged around a large blotter full of bizarre doodles. A thick yellow wad of paper, a manuscript of some kind, was sat in front of him, carefully annotated in red.

'Why are you here?' Bryceson asked sharply. 'Really?'

'I told you, we've brought you something,' Otto said with a sly grin, reaching into his satchel.

'No!' Bryceson shrieked, cowering back.

Fitz jumped in surprise. Otto stopped dead, dropping satchel on the floor.

'It's music, that's all, some music,' Otto stammered.

Bryceson looked confused. 'Music?' he shook his head. 'Oh... music.'

Fitz stooped to help Otto put the things back in his bag. 'He's a psycho, Otto,' he whispered.

'It's just his way. Trust me,' Otto hissed, rubbing his fingers against his thumb to suggest what a wad they were going to get out of old Davvers.

'What are you whispering?' Bryceson snapped.

'It's just some mood music. You know, real alien stuff.'

'Alien stuff?' Bryceson looked scared suddenly, scared. 'What do you know about alien stuff?'

'That it's all rubbish,' Fitz said flatly.

'But the music isn't,' Otto said hastily. 'May we play some? You did say you were particularly interested in music for kiddie space serials.'

Bryceson seemed to calm down a little. 'Well, yes, I did, didn't I? So naturally, you would think to... Yes, that's right. Yes, of course. Well, put it on, put it on.' Suddenly Davvers was all smiles, waving Otto over to a reel-to-reel buried under files in the corner and producing a hip flask from his top drawer, offering it round. Fitz politely declined.

Fitz felt his toes curling as the atonal jam sounded from the little speaker. Utter tosh. Bryceson seemed quite taken though. His head tilted sideways towards the reel-to-reel.

'Yes, we've had a run on sci-fi stuff.' Bryceson spoke slowly, the way Fitz's mum spoke when on her heavier medication. 'I've had Simon Capewell -'

'Who?'

'Film producer. He came round here, came to me... Searched me out special-like. Got a big new project and thought we might have the main titles and the stock tracks. Gave me the script. Wants me to show it to some talent, get the tapes in. Special-like.' Bryceson drummed his fingers on the yellow manuscript.

'That's not usual, is it?' Fitz said.

'Unprecedented,' Bryceson said simply, after a swig from the flask. 'But he came to me. He wanted to show *me*...'

Bryceson trailed off. "Sidereal Meteoroids" droned on pitifully. Mood music? This track had a real cob on.

'What's it about, Davin? The script, I mean.'

'Aliens are among us,' Davin said, his voice hoarse again. 'They look like us, but that's just an image beamed down from their mothership. They want to take over the world.'

'How original,' Fitz observed. 'Sort of Body Snatchers type thing, is it?'

'The only time you can stop them is at midnight, when the signal flickers and they're left defenceless, for just a few seconds.'

'Bit of a drawback. Why midnight exactly?'

'It's all to do with exposure to the solar flares.'

'Why, can they not see them at night or something?'

Bryceson ignored him. 'To begin the invasion, they intend to create general panic in the people... strike at us in the heart of our domesticity.'

The magic fret buzz was spat into the room through the speaker like a dog farting. Otto moved closer in to old Davvers. 'How will they do it?'

Bryceson's voice was a dread whisper. 'With onions.'

Fitz bit his lip. He mustn't lose the sale. Mustn't show disrespect.

Otto looked puzzled. 'Do it with onions? How?'

'You chop an onion, it makes you cry, right?' Bryceson shook his head, a grim *you-have-to-hand-it-to-those-aliens* smile on his face. 'Well, not these onions. They've been got at. Turned into *space* onions. You won't just cry when you chop these. The acid fumes are a

thousand times stronger. Smell these babies and your eyes *melt*. They melt! Blinded by onions, think of that!'

Fitz dug his nails into his palms. Pain, pain, don't laugh. He was fidgeting like his arse was chewing a toffee.

Even Otto didn't seem very impressed with this ruse for mass hysteria. 'Wouldn't the authorities just put out some warnings or something?'

'Who would guess it's in the onions? Who could suspect that crispy orange globes were evil? No one. Not until it's too late. How many housewives are chopping an onion at exactly same time around the world... How many will go on doing so in ignorance, never suspecting until it's too late... And with hospitals overrun with blinded housewives, with men distracted with having to keep house for themselves... that's when they strike.'

Fitz bit hard on both cheeks.

'It's so clever, so perfect, you could almost believe it was real.' He said strangely, staring into space.

'Where will the invasion happen?' Otto wondered.

'It begins in Turkey,' Bryceson said softly. 'Where better? Turkey boasts the highest per capita consumption of onions in the world...'

Fitz could stand it no more and, twisted in paroxysms of choking laughter, rushed madly from the room.

Bryceson watched him go, coldly.

Fitz staggered out and was about to release his giggles into the dingy waiting room when he saw it was occupied by a neatly dessed, impeccably groomed businessman. He looked to be in his fifties, swarthy-looking with a dark beard tinged with silver. Fitz lost the urge to laugh; there was something about this feller that made him feel a little uneasy.

'Who are you?' the man asked.

'Fitz.'

'You work for Mr Bryceson?'

'No, I'm a...' Fitz floundered for a moment. 'Fitz Kreiner. A musician.'

The guy now cocked his head and listened to the odd strains of the mood music floating through from the office, and Fitz suddenly knew he

would never be believed. Shame. Something about this bloke exuded power. He was a man going places, and had probably already visited a good many too.

'This music is yours?'

'Well, more Otto's really, my sometime collaborator -'

'I like it, Mr Kreiner.' The man smiled. 'My name is Simon Capewell. And you could be just the sort of person I need.'

Fitz found the man's eyes almost hypnotic, but the mood was abruptly broken when Bryceson called out:

'Mr Capewell? Is that you?'

'Davin, my dear fellow, how good to see you.'

'It's really you?'

'As you can see.' Capewell didn't find Bryceson's uncertainty at all off-putting. He merely held out his hands and smiled. 'And you must be Otto, the musician?'

Otto grinned, his cheeks quivering with pleasure.

'And you are?' Fitz wondered.

'This is the man I was telling you about. It's his script! Simon Capewell, film producer.'

The swarthy bearded man smiled charmingly. 'At your service.'

Fitz and Otto hung around to make a bit of small talk. Davin was keen to buy 'Sidereal Meteoroids', but since Capewell was there, he told the two of them to call back round tomorrow to sort out the details.

Just as Fitz was going, Mr Capewell remembered he'd left something in his car outside, and excused himself.

'Do you sell all your work to him?' Capewell asked quietly.

'Well, usually,' Otto admitted.

'You realise the mark-up he makes? When he sells that joyful music on to me, he'll have doubled his investment already. Money's no object, of course... but it's the principle that offends. I deal with artists, not agents.'

'What are you saying, Mr Capewell?' Fitz asked, already forming a pretty good idea.

'Simple. I gave him that script and the promise of a good deal of cash sales so he'd get in some real talent... Now he's procured you, I

can make you an offer myself - why should either of us deal with a middle man?'

Otto and Fitz exchanged nervous glances.

'You see, I want something exclusive, not the sort of thing anyone can pick up for a few guineas... Something distinctive.'

Fitz clicked his fingers. 'A signature tune!'

Capewell smiled. 'As you say, Mr Kreiner. So, what do you say? You'll get more money and I'll get specially commissioned music.' He seemed to remember something. 'Oh, and I shall still be making a saving for my film.'

'I dunno,' Otto said. 'Mr Bryceson's always been pretty fair with me.'

'Yeah, it's not just about the cash is it,' Fitz said.

'Meet me tomorrow at the Café Balzac on Wood Lane at noon, with another ten minutes' worth of material, and I'll give you three times what Bryceson would offer you.'

'Done,' said Fitz.

'Are you sure about this?' Otto said, wobbling along to keep up with Fitz as he strode triumphantly along the pavement, scattering passers-by, not getting out of the way for anyone.

'Of course I'm sure,' Fitz said. 'With that sort of cash I can afford to press my own single at Tony's!'

'Look!' Otto hissed.

Fitz turned to see Davin Bryceson staring down at them from his office window. His face was expressionless. Otto waved hopefully, but there was no response.

'What if he heard us bunnying on the stairs?'

'Nah,' Fitz said, starting up his strut again. 'He'd have gone mental, wouldn't he? Anyway, he won't be losing out.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, we do the music for Capewell, right?'

'Right.'

'Then we flog it to Davvers anyway. Twice the sale, pots of lovely cash.'

Otto stared at him dumbfounded. 'Isn't that a bit naughty?'

Fitz shrugged. 'Capewell's the naughty one.' He smiled to himself,

dreamily. 'We're just struggling musicians taking any chance that comes.'

'That Mr Capewell doesn't look the sort of geezer you'd want to cross.'

'Who's crossing him? He'll be getting what he wants.'

'He wants an exclusive, not something you can get anywhere!'

Fitz stopped again and sighed. 'Otto, do you really think any sod is going to buy that rubbish apart from those two? It's a gift horse! You don't look it in the mouth, you kiss it and slip it the tongue!'

Bryceson didn't react as Capewell came back into the room with his briefcase.

'Now, Mr Bryceson,' the bearded man said smoothly. 'Perhaps you'd care to play me samples of your other top composers' work? We could perhaps get them in, make them aware of the ideas of the script...'

Suddenly Bryceson slapped his palms down hard on the desk. 'Except they're not just ideas, are they, Mr Capewell?'

Capewell looked at him curiously. 'I'm sorry?'

'And you're not human, are you?'

As Capewell scoffed, Bryceson raised a paperweight and brought it down hard on the man's head. Capewell slumped forward on to the desk.

Bryceson looked down at him blearily. 'Not any more...'

Otto and Fitz were pushing through the front door to Otto's gaffe when the phone went.

'Grab it!' Fitz said. 'With our luck right now it'll be someone telling us we've won the Pools.'

Otto picked up the heavy black phone and soon his flushed jolly face was creased in concern.

'Well?' Fitz asked. 'How much have we won?'

'That was Davvers,' Otto said, puzzled. 'He sounds a bit... funny.'

'Diddlo,' Fitz reminded him, twirling a finger round his ear.

'Wants us to come back with the new music at eight o'clock. Says he'll make it worth our while.'

'Fab!' Fitz said, clapping his hands. 'We can knock out ten minutes'

worth of that old tripe in, oh... ten minutes?'

Otto nodded, still holding the phone, preoccupied. 'He said to make the track a real killer.'

It was dark when Fitz and Otto returned to Bryceson's office. They walked slowly up the gloomy creaking stairs and knocked on the door.

'Come!' shouted Bryceson, in a voice booming with confidence, a far cry from his bizarre mood earlier that day.

Fitz turned the handle and came uneasily inside. Bryceson, red-faced and smellier than ever, greeted them both with a knowing smile.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'how gracious of you to call by.'

'We've got the music you wanted,' Fitz said brightly. Then he heard a weird murmuring noise. Bryceson tried to cover it with a forced coughing fit.

'Do excuse me,' he said. 'The music, yes, yes, of course. Well, you must play it for me.'

Otto glanced nervously at Fitz and fed the bright yellow leader tape through the heads of the reel-to-reel, wrapping it round on to the empty spool.

Fitz heard the murmuring again, like the noise of someone's voice on a phone leaking through the earpiece. This time Bryceson pushed his desk forward noisily, and scraped his chair back against the floor as he got up. Fitz looked round for the source of the noise, and his eyes came to rest on the cupboard in the corner. The noise came again. Bryceson had someone locked up in there.

He was so busy processing the implications of this that he failed to notice that Bryceson had crossed to the door until he heard the noise of a key turning quietly in the lock.

He span round and Bryceson was standing behind him with a knife and a gloating smile. He popped the key in his mouth, swallowed it down and grinned.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Thought you could get away with it, didn't you?' Bryceson snarled.

Otto collapsed to his knees in helpless fear. 'We weren't going to go tomorrow, were we Fitz?' he blubbered. 'To see Mr Capewell at the Balzac I mean, we *weren't*!'

'Shut *up*, Otto,' Fitz hissed.

'I mean, we weren't really going to sell our music to the both of you -'

'Never mind all that,' Bryceson roared. 'I mean, you thought you'd get away with taking over the bodies of those two poor lads!'

Silence fell on the room like a bloated body from a great height.

Bryceson looked at Fitz. 'I remember your reaction when I told you about the plot. Unfazed. You even sympathised with them. Like you knew.' Bryceson nodded his fat head, assuredly. 'You, you and Capewell, thinking I wouldn't realise what you were up to. But I know. You thought you could make me think it was just a film, but I saw the three of you plotting together.'

'It's not what you think,' Fitz said nervously, taking a step back as Bryceson took a step forward with the knife. 'What... what the bloody hell *do* you think, by the way?'

'You're aliens,' Bryceson whispered. 'You're going to take over the world with your onions. And only I can stop you.'

Fitz shared an awful look with Otto.

'At midnight, when the solar flares fade and your human shells flicker, I have to do it.'

'It?' squeaked Otto.

Bryceson raised the knife. 'I have to kill you.'

There were four long hours to wait in tense, sweating silence until midnight. Tied up in a crappy little office with a sweaty bloke, a fat little twerp and some weirdo with a beard, Fitz could've wished for better company. Capewell had been let out of the cupboard once Fitz and Otto had neatly walked straight into the trap, and the three of them sat in sullen silence. Fitz strained against the length of rope that bound him. He'd been frantically winking at Otto to make them loose knots, but Otto had been quivering so much with the knife pressed against his flapping throat he'd pulled them tighter than a camel's arse in a sandstorm. Bryceson had tied up Otto himself, and Fat Boy hadn't resisted.

No way out then. The minutes limped by like one-legged sloths.

'I need the toilet,' wailed Otto.

'Be quiet,' said Bryceson, who was watching his captives intently for any telltale signs of transmogrification.

'I really do. I'm going to wet myself.'

'For goodness' sake, man,' Capewell exploded. 'Let him go before he makes this place smell any worse.'

'There's a bedpan in the cupboard,' Bryceson said.

'I know,' muttered Capewell.

'You can use that.'

Otto looked relieved, then realised his hands were tied.

'I suppose I'll have to help you,' Bryceson said, looking at Otto strangely.

Otto emitted another tiny squeak.

'Really,' Capewell muttered distastefully, and wormed way on his backside over to Fitz.

As Otto did what came naturally, and very noisily, Capewell reached for Fitz's hand.

'What's your game?' Fitz hissed, wriggling away.

'I'll untie you,' Capewell said. 'Then, you untie me.'

'You aliens are clever, I'll give you that,' Bryceson said, having a grim, long leer at Otto. 'Almost exactly like the thing.'

Otto sat back down, flushed and relieved.

'Can't you at least empty the pan, Davin, for God's sake?'

'I'm not leaving you alone to plot against me.'

'Well,' said Capewell. 'This is a music library, how about a little music?'

'Yes,' Bryceson said, after considering the idea for a moment. 'Some more of the 'Onion Doom' theme, hmm? You'd like that I'm sure.'

He snapped on the music, and Fitz groaned. Not this rubbish again.

Another hour passed, spent largely pleading fruitlessly for sanity. Bryceson just wasn't having it that they weren't aliens. Capewell, weirdly, seemed cool as a cucumber, hands still fiddling - ineffectually it seemed - with the ropes. 'Onion Doom' was out over the speakers for the sixth time, and Bryceson seemed in a trance.

'He's bonkers,' Fitz whispered to Capewell, who nodded.

'Otto,' whispered Capewell. 'How am I doing with Fitz's knots?'

'I'm not looking,' Otto hissed. 'He'll kill you if he catches you.'

'He'll kill us *all* if we don't get out of here, you cretin!'

'He might kill you, but not me,' Otto said. 'He wouldn't. He couldn't.'

Fitz stared at him. 'What, he helps you point Percy and that makes you special?'

Capewell cleared his throat meaningfully. 'What did Bryceson actually mean when he said, "almost exactly like the real thing", Otto?'

Otto looked guiltily down at the floor.

'Oh, great,' Fitz said, realising the score. 'The badger job. The nice lad. It's you, isn't it?'

Otto feigned indifference. 'Might be.'

'No wonder any old toss of yours goes down so well with Davvers,' Fitz whispered furiously, indicating the tape player. 'It always *has* done!'

Capewell nudged Otto with his foot. 'Well talk him round, if you've got any influence!'

'And get him to turn off this rubbish,' Fitz added, wishing he could plug his fingers in his ears.

With two hours to go, the music had stopped but Otto was in full flow. Crying, bright red in the face, quivering with all his considerable bulk, his pleas for mercy were still being met coldly by Bryceson, swigging liberally from his hip flask.

'It's no good, my dear,' Davvers said sadly, with a liquid belch. 'I know you're not really him.'

'But I am, I am!' Otto said. 'I can prove it!'

'Oh dear God,' muttered Fitz to himself, wincing as Capwell's thumbnail dug into his burning wrist. 'No diagrams, please.'

Bryceson looked at Otto suspiciously. 'How can you prove it?'

'I remember everything that happened,' Otto said. 'Every moment.' He looked coyly at Bryceson. 'Let me tell you.'

He shuffled over on his knees and started to whisper in Bryceson's ear. After a while, Fitz noticed a slow wistful smile begin to spread over the man's face.

An hour later, Otto was still on his knees and Bryceson was still looking

captivated. Fitz couldn't hear any more whispering though. His bladder was starting to ache, but a glance at the brimming pan was enough to dissuade him of even exploring the possibility.

'Nice of Otto to give us a distraction,' muttered Capewell.

'Are you not there with those ropes *yet*?' Fitz asked.

'Well you were no better with mine,' Capewell reminded him.

'Mr S. Capewell,' hissed Fitz scathingly. 'You couldn't escape well from a wet paper bag.'

But then, just as Bryceson launched into an ecstatic fit of coughing, the ropes came undone. Capewell fixed him with a hypnotic stare. 'Now... you will untie me.'

Fitz broke eye contact, feeling suddenly a bit queasy, caught a glimpse of Otto and Bryceson still deep in discussion and hurriedly looked away again. 'All right,' he said.

'Nice try,' Bryceson told Otto, smoothing back his own thinning hair from his sweaty forehead. 'But again, while you're clever, you're not clever enough.'

'What do you mean, Davvers!' protested Otto.

He pointed to the dog-eared script on the desk. 'It says in your manifesto that you have access to all your taken-over victims' memories.'

'But... But...'

Davvers was triumphant. 'And to disguise your race's telepathic talents, you insist on communicating orally!'

Fitz shut his eyes wearily. He could read Capewell's mind right now. Get these ropes untied and let's get the hell out of here. As Otto shuffled miserably back away from Bryceson, Fitz's cramping fingers fumbled frantically with Capewell's knots.

'Forty-five minutes, gentlemen,' Bryceson intoned. 'And I will destroy you all, and save the world.'

He wound back the heavy spool on the reel-to-reel and played the 'Onion Doom' theme once again.

'You've been fumbling with these ropes for forty minutes you imbecile,' Capewell hissed furiously.

Fitz bit his lip. 'Don't rush me. It's giving, it's giving...'

'Five minutes to go,' Bryceson announced, without a good deal of enthusiasm, tapping the knife on his desk.

'For the last time, Mr Bryceson,' said Fitz, 'you'll be committing murder if you do this. Human murder. We're not aliens. We're not packing any onions. You can frisk us if you...' He broke off. 'Well, take our word for it, OK?'

Bryceson sighed, tapping his feet along to the sound of Otto's wayward bongos. 'Four minutes.'

Capewell was furious with Fitz. 'Hurry, you oaf! I'm not dying here in this backwater -'

'Davvers, they're trying to escape!' Otto cried, deciding the moment had come to pull his masterstroke. 'I'm not - but *they* are! They're the guilty ones, kill them, not me! Them!'

Bryceson' s eyes widened.

Fitz held his hands up in a protestation of innocence.

Then he remembered his hands were supposed to be tied.

Bryceson roared in anger and tipped over the desk, sending papers and paper cups scattering all over the office. Otto screamed like a girl. Fitz dived aside as Bryceson lunged at him with the knife. Capewell struggled silently to free himself, and Fitz himself threw himself at the door. It wouldn't budge.

Bryceson was recovering himself for another charge. He stared blearily at Fitz.

'Wait a minute,' he said. 'You flickered!'

Fitz froze. 'Eh?'

'You flickered, you definitely flickered.'

'I did *not* flicker!!'

'Oh, you did! You did!'

Capewell rolled his eyes. 'He's no alien, you fool.'

'It's time! Time!' Bryceson assumed a messianic pose, then brandished his knife and stepped drunkenly forward.

Then Fitz saw it.

It must have rolled under the desk earlier that day when Otto dropped his bag, and now there it lay, exposed: salvation. He knew it was the only thing that could possibly save him.

As Bryceson swung down the knife towards him, Fitz held up the onion like a holy offering.

The blade stuck deep into the vegetable's firm, springy flesh.

In desperation and fear, Fitz shouted, 'Let the onion of doom burn out your eyes, puny Earthling!' at the top of his lungs.

And Bryceson went to pieces.

He threw both knife and onion across the room and flapped around like the maid did in the Tom and Jerry cartoons, when Thomas's services were urgently required. 'I'm blind! I'm blind!' Both hands were clamped over his eyes and he wailed and shrieked, staggering round his office, slamming into furniture.

Until, inevitably, he fell head first into the bedpan with an almost inconceivably unpleasant splash.

Fitz grabbed the knife and removed the onion. Then he sliced through Capewell's bonds.

'Thank you,' said Capewell politely, flexing his fingers. He stared wearily down at Bryceson's sobbing, shivering bulk for a few moments, then deftly removed the spool of tape with the 'Onion Doom' music from the player. He crossed to the door and kicked it savagely until it broke open.

'I suggest you call the police, Mr Kreiner. Farewell.' Calm and self-assured, Capewell walked away without another word.

'I can still see!' whimpered Bryceson. 'Otto, your water... it's the cure! It's the cure!' He lifted himself and clumsily hugged Otto, who was sitting there shaking with his eyes closed. 'We shall save the world together, boy, you and I... together!'

'Like the man said - diddlo,' muttered Fitz. 'Absolutely, positively, irretrievably, diddlo.'

And he called the police.

The next day, Fitz was hanging around Davin's offices in front of the news stand headline - 'Guitar-plucking hero foils music library monster' - waiting to be recognised and congratulated. Quite a few people had already recognised his picture from the Standard and said a few awestruck words at his amazing bravery. He'd managed to embellish the tale so that he came across as almost unfeasibly heroic. Who was

about to contradict him? Capewell had simply vanished and was proving untraceable. And when the police came round to the music library, they'd discovered the badger job photos in the general melee of papers all over the office floor, and promptly arrested Otto along with Bryceson for conspiracy to contravene the Obscene Publications Act. Serve the duplicitous sod right. He'd be out before long, Fitz doubted there was sufficient evidence to really have him, and Bryceson would doubtless end up eating baby food in the hospital ward in Stangmoor. Happy endings all round.

And here's mine, Fitz thought as he noticed Italian Tony coming up the street, looking at the music library with an impressed expression.

'Read all about it, then?' asked Fitz, affecting bashfulness.

'You know it,' said Tony. 'Fantastic news. Fantastic.'

'Never seen a man wield a scimitar like that before,' Fitz reflected. 'Wasn't easy disarming him of course, but...'

Tony didn't seem to be listening.

No point messing about, thought Fitz. Strike while the iron's hot "Course, now I'm a local hero, Tony, I guess you'll be a little more interested in me recording for you, right?'

'Nope. I just come from talking to Bryceson's creditors.' Tony grinned, displaying a hitherto unseen collection of crooked teeth. 'He's welched on their final demands. Probably what sent him over the edge. So I stepped in, see?'

Fitz's smile faltered. 'Where'd you get the money, Tony?'

'Sold the Music Cow, didn't I? Like I said, no one's buying homemade records no more. The real money's in a place like this.' He licked his lips. 'No more cheap pasta for Tony.'

In the distance, Fitz could hear the unmistakable sound of his hopes being flushed down the toilet one final time.

He turned and walked disconsolately away.

Then he saw her. The Girl. Still in her long brown coat and crimson headscarf, she was looking at him as she came along street. And now she was smiling at him. Really smiling.

'Hear you're a bit of a hero,' she said.

Fitz recovered himself a little and shrugged. 'Well, y know.'

She looked Fitz up and down. 'Hidden depths, haven't you? You

don't look the type who could take on some maniac with a machine gun.'

'All in a day's work,' Fitz said modestly, his heart leaping.

She gave him a dazzling smile. 'You know, my boyfriend won't be back for another week.' She looked at him with deep sultry eyes. 'Perhaps we could get to know each other a little better?'

Fitz grinned. 'Perhaps we could at that.' He offered her his arm suavely and gave her his best man-of-the-world confident smile. 'Your place or mine?'

She took his arm.

Closing his eyes in a silent prayer of thanks, Fitz didn't see the lamppost until his head smacked into it.

When he woke up, it wasn't with the woman of his dreams beside him but some old dear on a trolley down in Casualty.

Another perfect day.

'There *has* to be something more,' Fitz muttered, staring up at the hospital ceiling as if he could see through it, to the sky and the stars.

Mr S. Capewell entered the darkly glowing room, tutting. The boy had seen through his cunning pseudonym for what it was. He'd underestimated these humans, underestimated them badly. He'd choose more careful disguises in future, and work harder on the hypnotism. He'd not be caught out and humiliated in this way again.

The Master walked over to the workbench erected beside the hexagonal control console, and squinted at the flask being warmed by the tireless blue of his Bunsen burner.

Inside it, suspended in sticky fluid, the onion was nudged and nuzzled by the boiling currents. He smiled in satisfaction.

There was a chime from the console and he activated the scanner switch. The monitor revealed an ordinary looking man standing on a clear white flight deck.

'Greetings Ambassador,' said the Master.

'Our plans proceed?' asked the Ambassador.

'Indeed. The onions are almost ready,' the Master remarked with pleasure, stroking his beard.

The Ambassador's face flickered, just for a second. 'Excellent. We

proceed toward the destruction of Earth.'

The scanner faded to black, and the Master went over to his beloved retro computer bank, the one with the ever-spinning computer spools that served no purpose whatsoever. Now he wound in the audio tape taken from Bryceson's office. The discordant three-note theme echoed pleasingly about his TARDIS's darkened control room.

'So much easier to be truly evil with proper musical accompaniment,' the Master said happily, and got back to tending his onion.

The Doctor and the Dragon

BRADLEY McGRATH

It was a cool autumn afternoon when the storyteller came, clad in his dusty patchwork coat and travel-worn boots. The villagers looked up from their chores and tasks, and watched the storyteller stride down the road to the village on his long lanky legs, knowing that tonight they would be regaled with epic tales of heroes and fantastical beasts, of magicians and empires, of news of the outside world. This sleepy little village could go years without knowing the results of distant battles, not knowing who currently ruled the land. Not that it mattered much. This tiny village was so small and out-of-the-way that History rarely intruded upon its peaceful tranquillity. The storyteller ignored them and continued directly on towards the inn, to tend to his parched throat and prepare it for a night of constant talking, of hushed awed whispers and grand proclamations.

The afternoon wore on, the people of the village growing anxious for the day to end, when they could all gather around a bonfire and listen to legends of brave men and women being heroic and having adventures. They wondered which tales the storyteller would tell; would it be the adventures of Borak the Barbarian who slew the mighty worm Hazoth, or the ballad of Tegling the Mage, who built the magnificent Spire that held up he sky?

Finally, after what seemed like centuries, the sun slid over the horizon, glowing an angry red-orange hue, disappearing to where ever it went when the Moon shone. A bonfire was built on the village common, and it was lit, forming a fiery beacon signalling the start of the evening's entertainment.

The storyteller was there first, having selected the most comfortable log, as was his right. He shoved his long legs close to the flames, keeping them warm, especially the one where his big toe poked out of his old boots. People from all over the village gathered around the

bonfire, men and women, young and old. It wasn't often that a storyteller arrived, and they didn't want to miss out on a bit of it.

After everyone had settled in, after all the latecomers had arrived, the storyteller began the show. He began by reporting the news from around the land, relating how King Uther had died of old age, and had been succeeded by his son, William. He mentioned that the war between the Seriss desertmen and the MeGurrie clan of dwarves had ended, and that the Orcs of Blackrock had declared bloodfeud on the northern elves. Once such concerns were out of the way, the storyteller started on the main event. He'd prepared this story a week ago, bringing the tale up out of the depths of his memory, a memory that held hudreds of complete stories.

'A long, long time ago,' he began, 'when the world was young and newly forged by the gods, powerful and wicked creatures roamed the land, seeking to destroy and corrupt the beautiful works the gods had made. They enslaved all the peoples the land, the humans, the dwarves, the elves, the desertmen, even the orcs, and set them to work, forcing them to create treasures for their amusement and to build great monuments to power. They called themselves the Andrak, but we know as dragons.'

The attentive audience shuddered at the thought of these terrible creatures.

'The gods looked down upon their marvellous creation and saw what the evil monsters were doing to their precious children. But they could do nothing, forbidden to interfere by a force more powerful than they, Time. So the gods sent down to the land one their own, a traveller who had made a deal with Time, and could come and go as he pleased across the all the worlds and across History. He was a powerful magician and adventurer who called himself The Doctor.'

The village people wiggled with excitement. They loved the tales of the Doctor, and they hadn't heard one for ages.

'In these times, a particularly cruel and evil dragon called Smarag ruled over the entire land of Erendor, as it is called today. Everyday, Smarag would fly on his great leathery wings to the town of Gubril, and demand that the people there mine for him precious metals and sparkling jewels, and work these treasures of the Land into beautiful

works of art, so splendid as to bring a tear of happiness to the eye of the crudest Troll. The people of Gubril fashioned exquisite pieces of jewellery: gold and silver adornments encrusted with glowing faceted jewels that sparkled even in darkness. They spun fine silks and fabrics with beautiful designs stitched into them. They forged powerful and excellent weapons, so marvellous that a warrior would weep to use them in battle. If the people of Gubril failed to please the dragon, Smarag would open wide his gaping mouth with its large sharp teeth, and let forth a huge ball of fire, and lay waste to a quarter of the city, and eat many people.

'This, then, was the arrangement in Erendor: the people would supply the dragon with riches, and the dragon would refrain from killing too many of them.'

The storyteller paused while he gulped down a mug of ale, and arranged himself upon the log. He had finished with the background, and now it was time to start the real story.

'One fine day, if there could be such a thing in a land ruled over by a creature as foul as Smarag, Tebren, a prospector from Gubril, was searching for a new vein of gold in the hills of Mildarr, to the east of Smaragor. Tebren was a dwarf, and dwarves are noted the world over for their skill with metal and stone working, even in such ancient times. Tebren, therefore, was a skilled prospector, and so the perfect person to find new sources of gold for the people of Gubril to fashion into treasures for the mighty Smarag. His desire for treasure was insatiable, and the mines near Gubril were beginning to run dry. If more gold could not be found, it would surely mean doom for the slaves of Smarag.

'As Tebren was examining a rock to see if it bore gold, a great noise like a roaring bull or a rolling thunder blew through the trees, rising and falling as if it was flying closer, then further, then closer once more. Tebren cowered, fearing that it was the roaring of Smarag, come to terrorise him. Before long, the noise faded away, but Tebren still lay quiet, not wishing to draw the attention of the dragon.

'There was a rustling in the trees, and Tebren's heart leapt, then fell back down when he saw that the disturbance did not come from Smarag, but from a human. Tebren stood up and dusted himself down,

trying to regain his dignity.

'Good morning,' said the human, 'Might I enquire as to the name of this place?' The Storyteller put on a voice in the manner of the humans of the Grey Peaks Ranges, and he made it strong and commanding, a voice of power.

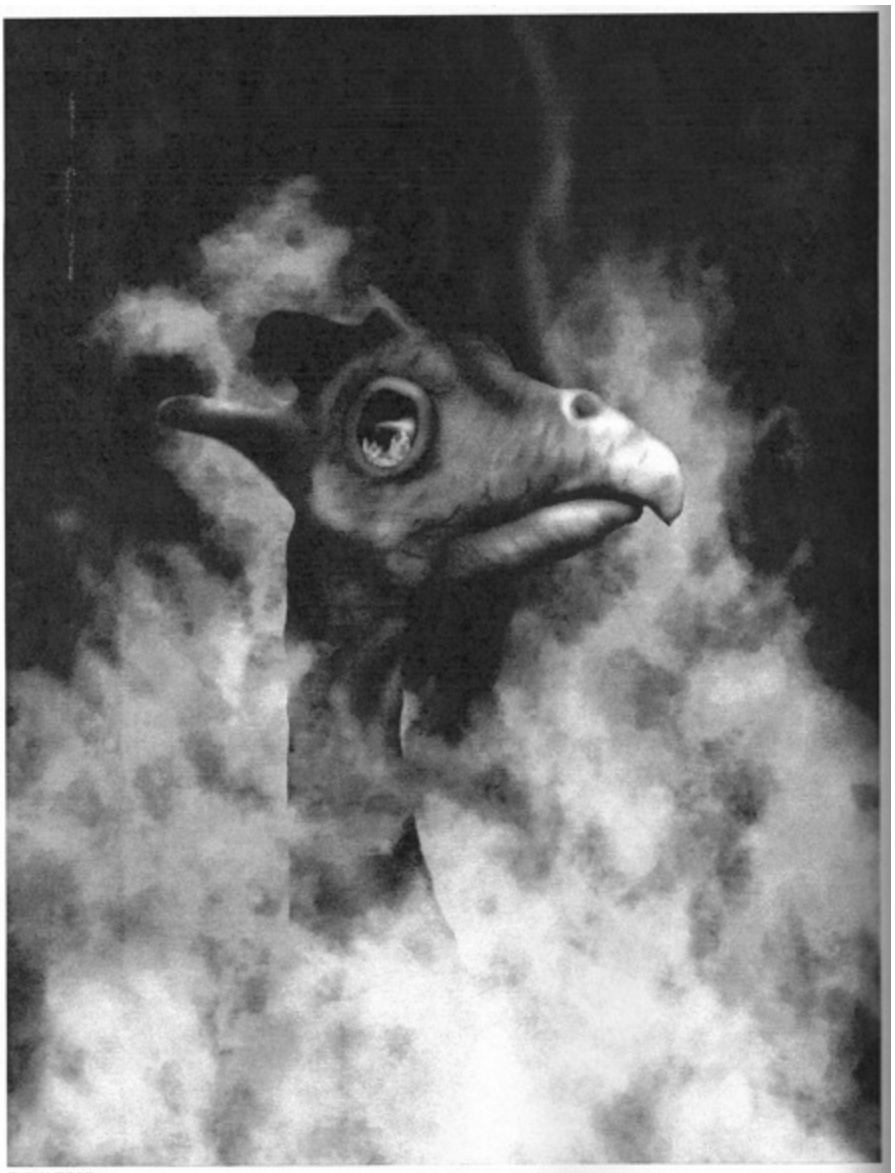
'You might, good sir,' replied Tebren, 'These are the hills of Mildarr, in the land of Erendor.' For Tebren, the Storyteller spoke in an accented voice, in the way a dwarf spoke.

'What do you call this world?'

'I beg your pardon?' said Tebren.

'The ground and all that is upon it: what do you call it?'

'Why, it is the Land. May I ask your name, good sir?' asked Tebren.



THE ANDRAK
MODEL BY JIM SANGSTER
EFFECTS BY CLAYTON HICKMAN

'I am the Doctor.'

An awed hush arose from the storyteller's audience.

'In these days, we would be filled with awe at meeting the Doctor, but the famous mage had not yet been heard of in these ancient times. Tebren instead thought the Doctor an alchemist, involved in the refining of metals for the dragons and demons that ruled the Land.

'Tebren told the Doctor his name, Tebren of the clan McGrindock, and, since he had finished his prospecting (there were plentiful gold deposits in the Mildarr hills; Smarag would continue to gain treasure,

but the people would live) they could travel on to Gubril together. The Doctor agreed to this, and the two of them set off along the banks of the Aradine River together.

'The Aradine River is a wide and clear blue stream that starts in the snowy peaks of the Misty Mountains to the west of Gubril, and flows across the Plains of Erendor and through the Dunwood Forest and the Mildarr valley into the Endless Ocean. It was through the Dunwood Forest that the Doctor and Tebren had to pass to reach Gubril.

'Tebren and the Doctor discussed matters such as the mining and refining of metals, for Tebren believed the Doctor to be an alchemist. Little did he realise the Doctor's true identity.

'The Dunwood is a black and evil forest, full of dark twisted oak trees that let no light pass through their branches. Their roots would poke up through the paths, tripping travellers and turning aside carts. In this dark forest lurked vicious beasts and cruel monsters, ready to pounce on unsuspecting travellers, serving the wicked plans of the baneful creatures that stalked the Land. As the Sun fell and brought darkness to the Land, the denizens of the Durwood would prowl its twisted paths. They were prowling now.

'Stop!' barked a voice behind Tebren and the Doctor. They turned around to see who had spoken. There stood a pack of wolves, sharp of fang and quick of claw. Their minds abounded with cunning and cruelty, and hunger gleamed in their eyes.

'Hello,' greeted the Doctor, always polite and friendly, 'I don't believe I've met a talking dog before.'

'The wolves bristled, raising their hackles. 'We are not dogs!' the speaker retorted. 'We are wolves, the strongest and smartest beasts in all the Land, and we have come to eat you.' The other wolves barked and howled in approval.

'Tebren squeaked in fear, but the Doctor remained calm. 'Eat us? Why would you want to do that?'

'We are hungry, and you are weak. You two will make a good meal for us.'

'No, we won't,' replied the Doctor. 'I am rather small for a human, and my dwarven friend here is even smaller. I'm afraid we won't make much more than small snacks for your wolf pack. Perhaps food will be

more plentiful elsewhere.'

'A small snack will do us nicely.'

'We won't be a very nice snack, though.'

'Why is that?' the wolf asked, intrigued.

'I am quite fond of spicy foods, and I doubt that your canine palate will find my flesh to your liking. And dwarves eat rocks...'

'No, we...' interrupted Tebren.

'The Doctor silenced him. 'Well, they spend all their time with rocks, so Tebren's flesh will be quite gritty. I don't think you'll find us an agreeable snack.'

'We will eat you anyway, if only to rid the Land of your irritating presence,' shouted the wolf.

'How hungry are you?' queried the Doctor.

'The winter was cold and bitter, and food is scarce. We have not filled our bellies for a week and half. The pack is ready to eat anything, no matter how small, tasteless, or annoying it may be.'

'If that's the case,' said the Doctor, 'then why not eat him.' The Doctor pointed to an old and greying wolf, one eye blind and the other fading. His fur was ragged and falling out. This wolf was once pack leader, but his time had come and younger wolves commanded. 'He has a bit of meat on him, and it should be soft and tender. He is old and weak, and can only be holding the rest of you back. Why waste precious food on a useless creature, when younger wolves could grow strong and become better hunters, and bring in more food? Let him die with honour, so that he can give back to the pack and continue your grand dynasty.'

'Some of the younger wolves eyed the old wolf with a hungry gleam in their eye. One crept up and sniffed him, curiously. Angered, the old wolf spun around and bit the other. Soon, a vicious fight erupted, and the whole pack was tearing itself to pieces. Not wishing to watch the ugly scene and wait for the outcome, the Doctor beckoned to Tebren and they both ran off down the path and they quickly exited the Dunwood.

'The Doctor and Tebren walked along the edge of the plain of Erendor, by the banks of the Aradine River, marvelling at its crystal waters. They arrived at the town of Gubril just after sunset. Seeing the

Sun set over the hills near Gubril, Tebren hurried the Doctor along to the nearest inn, The Beagle Inn. 'We must hurry, for the curfew is soon, and no-one is allowed out after dark.'

'Once they were inside the inn and asked the innkeeper for a meal, the Doctor asked, 'Why is there a curfew?'

'You don't know?!' exclaimed Tebren. How could anyone in the Land not know? The Doctor indicated that he did not. He said that he was from very far away, but Tebren knew that the entire Land was under the rule of the dragons and demons. 'The curfew was decreed by the dragons to keep us from plotting to overthrow their rule. Anyone caught loitering outside after dark is attacked by the wolves that stalk the night,' replied Tebren. 'Everyone knows that,' he added.

'Who are the dragons?' the Doctor asked.

'Tebren decided that the Doctor had been living under a large rock at the bottom of deep well for all his life. He told the Doctor all about the dragons and the demons that had come swooping down out of the skies many centuries ago, and how they had enslaved all the peoples of the Land and set them to work fashioning treasures. It was a story that everyone in the Land knew, having learnt it while on their mother's knee.

'Tomorrow, I think I may pay a visit to this Smarag,' the Doctor announced as he finished his drink. The Doctor rented a room to stay the night in, and Tebren hurried quietly out of The Beagle Inn and ran as fast he could to his little cottage down the street.'

The Storyteller paused while he sipped at a drink and warmed himself at the fire, and then he continued on with the story. 'The very next day, the Sun rose up above the horizon and brought light to all the Land, as it did every day. The people of Gubril awoke to the cry of roosters and, after they had finished their morning chores, they prepared for a trip to Smaragor.

'All the treasures that the people of Gubril had made were readied for transport. There were fine silks, jewel encrusted golden statues and ornaments, shiny but strong armour, magnificent swords and awe-inspiring crowns; all of this was loaded into carts to be taken to Smaragor. The Doctor was there, watching the progress with a keen eye. Tebren was there also, talking to the Doctor.

'Why does Smarag demand all this treasure?' the Doctor asked.

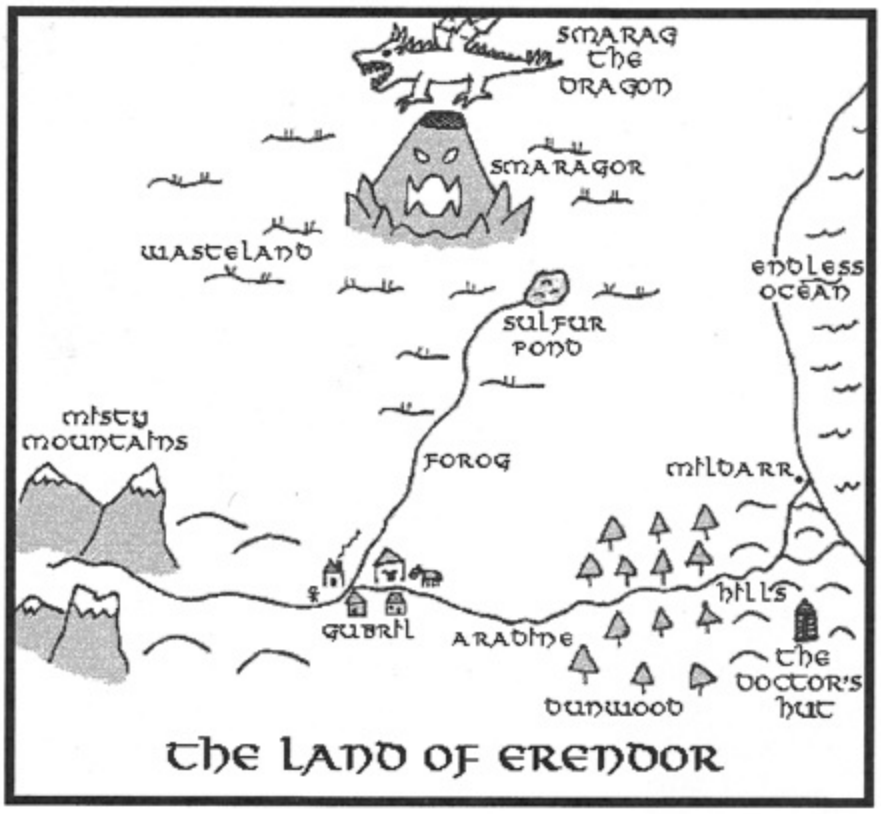
'The dragons never give a reason for the things they do,' Tebren answered, 'But they are greedy and cruel. They like to see weaker peoples suffer.' The Doctor had accompanied the convoy as he wished to meet Smarag. Tebren had no idea how he had ended up following along.

'The horses and oxen were harnessed to the carts and the treasure convoy set off down a well-worn and dusty road that followed the Forog river to the forbidding volcano of Smaragor. The Forog River split off from the Aradine at Gubril and led to Smaragor, where it ended in a bubbling lake of boiling sulphur. The waters of the Forog were dusty and brown, and no water creatures lived in them, as Smarag had fouled them. The land around the convoy faded from the bright greenness of the Erendor plains to the grey and gloomy Wastes. The only life that lived here were coarse grasses and scavenging creatures, such as vultures. A black, black cloud lay directly ahead.

'By about midday, when the Sun was directly overhead, the treasure convoy arrived at the volcano of Smaragor. The volcano rose high up into the sky, where it belched out great clouds of black smoke and dust that obscured the sky all around. The volcano itself was formed out of a hard black stone that radiated darkness and death. Large jagged spikes of black rock surrounded the base. But most terrible of all was the large cave situated in the side of the volcano, and the two smaller ones above it. These caves were lit by a fiery internal glow, which, with the stalactites and stalagmites in the large cave, gave the volcano a malevolent air and a cruel and monstrous face.

'The convoy now veered away from the Forog river, as it had become ever more filthy and polluted as they approached the mountain. To the eastern side of Smaragor, the Forog pooled into the lake of burning sulphur I described earlier. The stench of sulphur, like that of rotten eggs, permeated the air and hung around Smaragor in great yellow clouds. The people of Gubril had to tie handkerchiefs around their mouths so that they could breath.

'To the other side of Smaragor the convoy marched, where a much smaller cave was found. It opened into a long and dark tunnel that



BRADLEY McGRATH

burrowed deep within the mountain. The treasure convoy headed inside, into the thick, warm blackness. They walked for some time down the winding, twisting corridor, until, at last, they reached the lair of Smarag.

'The dragon's lair was a huge cavern, so wide that not even an Elf with the keenest eyes could see the other side. In the very centre of the cavern was an immense pile of treasure: every sort of treasure imaginable. The people of Gubril stopped for the shortest of instances to admire the extraordinary hoard, placed there by themselves, their fathers, their grandfathers, their great grandfathers and so on, back into time immemorial.

'And perched atop this great pile of riches and jewels and finery was Smarag himself. Smarag was gigantic; his belly as large as four cottages, his tail and neck as long as a tall tree trunk. His body was coated in tough green scales that glittered in the firelight like eldritch magicks. From the tip of his tail to the nose of his frightful head was a row of the sharpest spines. From his back sprouted a pair of great leathery wings, like those of a bat, but green and scaly and much, much larger. They were in immaculate condition, and their edges were dotted with spikes. Supporting his huge body, were four legs, each as thick as tree trunks and ending in great claws, topped with sharp talons. And his head? Oh, his head was a terrifying visage to behold, pointed ears and pointed horns surrounding a mouth that gaped wide

open to reveal a double row of shining, razor sharp teeth and a long. pointed, slithering tongue. Above his toothy snout was a pair of eyes that shone red and radiated evil and malice.

'Each person wheeled their cart of riches up to Smarag, and picked out a few pieces of treasure that were particularly beautiful, showing it to the dragon. Smarag gave each a brief inspection, and then waved the man on with slight flick of a claw. The cart of treasure was tipped onto Smarag's magnificent hoard. Once done, the cart-bearer then fled the cavern as fast as he could wheel it. None thought to steal even the slightest piece of treasure, or to hide one before it was delivered to Smarag's cavern, for the dragon knew every single item in his hoard, and he would know if the people were not fulfilling their quota.

'The Doctor said nothing, but waited until each person has delivered his treasure. Tebren lingered near the entrance to the cavern, not really wanting to be there, but not wishing to leave, lest he miss out on something important. Smarag continued to lie atop his fortune, eyeing the Doctor curiously. He knew that the Doctor was wise and powerful, a magician of vast powers.

'Once the cavern was empty, the Doctor walked slowly over to Smarag's accumulation of wealth. his footsteps resounding around the huge cathedral-like cavern. He prodded the treasure with his magic sceptre, which the Doctor had called an *Umbrella*. Gold coins trickled out like a miniature avalanche, and tumbled over the Doctor's feet.

''Nice,' he said at last

'What do you men 'nice'?!' bellowed Smarag, furious. He regarded his hoard as impressive dazzling, extraordinary and fantastic. The wad 'nice' just did not apply. Whispers of smoke curled from Smarag's nostrils, signalling his rage.

'I've seen better.'

'*What?!*' Smarag roared.

'The Lopdornii of Smatch has a hoard twice the size of this one. Feerdun the Ferocious has one four times as high, five times as wide and twice as dazzling,' the Doctor declared, inventing names as he spoke. 'Why, Smaug the Magnificent has a hoard of treasure greater than yours as yours is to this mere coin.'

'I have never heard of the dragons of which you speak. You are spinning tales. Mine is the greatest treasure in all the Land. No others come even close to mine.'

'It is the most disappointing treasure I have had misfortune to lay my eyes upon! I came all this way to see the fabled treasure of Smarag I have heard so much about, only to see a pile of small change that barely rivals that of a bowerbird.'

'Smarag's rage had reached boiling point, and he just had to explode. From his nostrils burst two jets of flame that lanced out in white-hot streams and surrounded the Doctor.'

At that moment two small rockets launched from somewhere deep in the woods, reaching up into the now pitch black night sky like pillars of white flame, and exploded overhead with a flash of and orange. They had been brought the day before yesterday from an alchemist in Crydee, and planted in the forest by the storyteller before he arrived. A very long fuse had been set. His timing had been perfect. As usual.

The audience gasped in awe and delight. Many had never seen such things before.

The Storyteller continued with the story. 'Smarag let loose his flames for what seemed like an awfully long time, especially to Tebren. The Doctor was hidden under a huge ball of fire, as bright as the Sun. Smarag eventually stopped, his fury satisfied. The flames dissipated, and underneath, covered in soot but otherwise unharmed, stood the Doctor.

'Pitiful,' he sniffed.' The audience cheered. 'Your flame is as poor as your treasure. Look at this.' The Doctor picked up a jewel-encrusted crown and waved it in front of Smarag's nose. 'It is scratched, bent, and without personality. Your slaves been labouring for so long that they no longer have any pride in or love of their work.'

'My artificers and craftsmen are the finest in the Land. They are skilled experts and experienced at their job. They have provided me with the finest works of art in history.'

'So why not let them go?'

'Because I need more treasures, more jewels, more works of art,' the dragon roared. 'My desire for treasure is insatiable, a never-ending quest for wealth that fills my soul with a lust for gold. Nothing, neither

force nor infinite wealth, can halt my pursuit of riches.'

'The Doctor pondered the situation. He dusted the soot off his and hat and dusted his face, before speaking once again. 'If I provide you with a work of art that is absolutely perfect, the finest treasure in the Universe, unsurpassed and unequalled by all combined treasures in existence, will you let these people go, and leave them forever?'

'Smarag the dragon was silent as he considered the Doctor's proposal. 'Yes. Yes, I will.'

'Then it is settled. I, the Doctor, will return in one year's time with the greatest treasure ever.' And with that, the Doctor spun around and exited the cave, with Tebren following close behind. Once Smarag was sure that they were out of earshot, he gave a little chuckle, which grew to become a deep and diabolical roar of laughter. He had no intention whatsoever of honouring the Doctor's wishes. He would keep his slaves, and have the Doctor's masterpieces as well.

'And so, for an entire year the Doctor laboured within the TARDIS, his magic workshop that had the aspect of a small blue box on the outside, and a great castle on the inside. It was the arrival of the TARDIS that Tebren had heard so long ago, for it had the power to travel anywhere in the Land and in the Heavens. The Doctor sailed the TARDIS all around the Land, and to other Lands that float unseen in the Heavens, collecting beautiful things to make a treasure for Smarag from. He worked day after day, night after night, toiling in his workshop, cutting priceless jewels, sewing rare silks, forging gold and silver items, skillfully creating an exquisite work of art. He used arcane magicks to imbue his creations with mystical purity and beauty.

'And, after a year of constantly working on the treasure for Smarag, the Doctor pronounced his masterpiece complete. He journeyed back, through the hills of Mildarr, the Dunwood, along the crystal clear Aradine River, to the town of Gubril, along the foul waters of the Forog and across the Wastelands to the forbidding volcano that was Smaragor.

'I see you have returned Doctor,' Smarag purred as he lay atop his mountain of riches. 'What priceless masterpiece have you brought for me?'

'The Doctor lifted a parcel from his cart, and ever so c irefully, he

unwrapped it. Inside, there was a splendid suit, fit for a dragon. It was made of the finest silks in all existence: from the scum slugs of the land of Mydronixia, the Duvoss worms of Baat, and even silk from the great Lambton Worm. Stitched into it were marvellous designs, images of nature, magic runes and likenesses of dragons performing great deeds. It was decorated with jewelled brooches and badges. It was indeed perfect

'But Smarag was only mildly impressed. 'It is marvellous Doctor. You are truly a genius and a master craftsman. But it is not perfect.'

'The Doctor hid his disappointment. 'What is wrong with it?'

'The colours are not bright enough.'

'We are in a cave,' the Doctor pointed out.

'A perfect suit should be bright and visible even in a dark as black as pitch. This is not perfect.'

'Then I will build for you another work of art that is perfect. I will return next year.' And with that, the Doctor left. Afterwards, Smarag dressed himself in his new suit, and paraded around his cave, imagining himself a handsome and dazzling young dragon.

'For another year the Doctor toiled in his workshop, creating another extraordinary treasure. When he was done, the Doctor went back to Smarag.

'This time, the Doctor had forged for Smarag a mighty sword, a blade so long and wide that only a dragon could wield it. The hilt was studded with gems and the pommel was an emerald the size of a human head. Above the handle were a pair of ornate dragons made of gold and silver, with small rubies for eyes. The blade was forged from a metal that was stronger than iron, but weighed far less. Runes were inscribed into the sword, giving it mystical powers. It glowed with an inner radiance, illuminating the whole cavern with its mystical light. It was quite a sight to behold.

'As well as the sword, the Doctor had forged a shield and a suit of armour for Smarag. Each was golden in hue, but had none of that metal's softness. Emblazoned upon the breastplate and upon the shield were stylised designs of noble dragons. The shield and armour shone with the light of the Sun.

'Smarag was very impressed. He swung the sword around, testing

it. 'The sword and the armour are excellent pieces of work, Doctor. Light, but strong, and well balanced. But they are not perfect.'

'How are they not perfect?'

'A truly perfect sword should slice through reality itself. And the ultimate armour should shield the wearer from Time itself,' Smarag replied.

'But a warrior who used such a sword should have to be wary that he does not fall through the gap in reality. And how would a warrior be able to fight, if he were shielded from Time?' the Doctor answered.

'They are not perfect,' the dragon repeated.

'Then I shall go away for another year, and at the end of that year, I shall return with a treasure that is perfect,' the Doctor declared, and then he left. And Smarag dressed up in his new golden armour and brandished his new sword and shield, imagining himself vanquishing mighty foes and single-handedly defeating great armies.

'The Doctor toiled in his workshop for yet another year, and at the end of that year, he returned to Smarag's cave, bearing another gift for the dragon's inspection. This time, the Doctor had created a crown, a crown large enough to be worn upon the head of a dragon. It was piled high with gemstones and precious metals, and lined with wonderful silks. It was a crown so beautiful that it seemed too good even for a great emperor, and possibly even a god. It spoke of regal splendour, majestic power and illustrious history.

'That crown is magnificent, Doctor,' Smarag congratulated. 'It is a marvellous adornment for a king. But it is not perfect. A perfect crown should make one's subjects fall down to their knees and worship their lord as a god.'

'A good king should not want fawning lackeys who agree with their master's every word. Great kings value those who speak their mind and advise against foolish actions.'

'It is not perfect.'

'Then I shall create for you another treasure that is perfect. I shall return in one year's time.' The Doctor left, and later, Smarag placed the fantastic crown upon his crest and dreamed of himself as the lord of all dragons, giving orders and receiving much respect and admiration.

'For another year the Doctor was busy in his workshop, and at the

end of that year, he travelled back to Smaragor, carrying his latest work.

'You have returned, Doctor,' Smarag greeted him. 'What have you got for me today?'

'The Doctor said nothing, but instead he walked towards Smarag until he was directly in front of the dragon's cruel face. 'I have for you my final gift.' From his pocket, the Doctor produced a tiny diamond, barely a sparkle in the gloom.

'That is no perfect treasure. It is merely a trinket, fit only for a ring.' Smarag laughed.

'Nay! I say this treasure is perfect. I will tell you its history,' the Doctor announced. 'Long, long ago, fifteen billion years ago, the Universe was created. From the debris of this, a great sun was born. It lived for a long while, and then it died. Then the gods came, five billion years ago, and they gathered up the dust and formed the Sun we see today, the Moon, and the Land, and everything upon it. Two hundred million years ago, a lump of coal fell deep under ground, where it was crushed by rocks and buried. Here it was squeezed and pressed, and it became a diamond. This diamond. This is a perfect crystal: no flaws, no stresses, no contamination. It is perfect.'

'It is worthless, a toy for the workers,' Smarag insisted.

'Gather up all the treasures that I have made for you,' the Doctor ordered. Smarag did so. 'Now put on the suit I have made.' Smarag was now a magnificent example of a handsome dragon. 'Now the armour.' Smarag shone like a hero, strong and invincible. Next, the Doctor had Smarag put on all the dragon-sized rings, and the others were fitted on to all of his spines and spikes. 'Put on the crown.' Smarag became a king of dragons, a figure of power. 'Now gather up your sword and shield.' Smarag picked up the great sword and strapped the shield to his scaly arm.

'The Doctor picked up a large golden plate out of Smarag's hoard, and he held it up in front of the dragon, just as the Sun slid down the sky and over the horizon. Bright sunlight rushed down the cave tunnel, illuminating Smarag in a golden aura. In the plate could be seen a great dragon, golden and beautiful, radiating an almost holy light. He was encased from his head to the tip of his tail in golden armour and

treasure. He sparkled from all the precious stones affixed to him. But the picture was not yet complete.

'The Doctor had one more item to place upon Smarag. The great dragon lowered his head so that the Doctor could attach the small diamond in the peak of Smarag's crown. It was the very pinnacle of Smarag's glory, the evening star itself rising over him. Smarag now shone with the light of a God.

'Now you are perfect,' the Doctor suggested to Smarag.

'Yes! Yes! I am a God!' Smarag roared triumphantly, blowing flames into the air.

'Now go out and prove your new status. Go and declare your rule over the other dragons. Conquer your rivals, Lopdornii, Feerdun, Smaug. Defeat them, and the others will worship you! You can be Emperor of the Andrak!' the Doctor cried.

'I will!' Smarag shouted, and took off into the air, beating his mighty leathery wings and circling the cave. He swooped out of the great mouth of the Smaragor and out into the darkening sky, shimmering in the light of the dying Sun.'

The Storyteller, as he spoke, reached into the recesses of his cloak and found a handful of special crystals and rocks, and tossed them into the bonfire. They exploded into green and gold and red flames, hissing and popping. The audience's imagination finished the illusion by picturing a green dragon, encased in golden armour, belching balls of fire. It twisted in the flames, fluttering its wings and bellowing challenges and defiance.

'The great dragon lord took off into the night, glittering in the starlight like a passing comet. He flew as fast as he could, into the fading sunset. Smarag had gone, and would be gone for a long time, leaving the Doctor with the perfect opportunity.

'The Doctor ran, as fast as he could, bounding across the wastelands and the banks of the Forog like a fleet-footed gazelle. He hopped over rocks and leapt over gullies. He tripped once or twice, but kept running, such was his haste to get back to Gubril.

'As he reached the town, the Doctor shouted out to the townspeople, who were just heading off to bed. 'The dragon is gone!' he yelled. 'Hurry up! We must move all the treasure out of his lair.

Hurry! Before Smarag returns!'

'But the people of Gubril were reluctant. 'But Smarag will destroy us if we defy him,' someone protested.

'He will not destroy you. Smarag needs you people to provide him with treasure,' the Doctor responded.

'If we do this, his anger will be terrible. He will punish of sorely.'

'What can he do? Put you into slavery?' the Doctor retorted. 'Come! You have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. This is your only chance to throw off the shackles off your slavery! Who will follow me?'

The people were quiet, and unsure.

'Tebren had been hovering around the back of the crowd. not quite sure what was going on. But he heard the Doctor's speech and shouted 'I will!' not really knowing why he did it. Following Tebren's example, another person shouted out 'I will too!' Then another, and another, and soon the whole crowd was cheering out cries of 'I do!,' 'I will!,' 'Me too!,' no-one wishing to appear less brave than another.

'And so, all the people of Gubril agreed to follow Doctor's plan, and they marched off to Smaragor that very night. The Doctor divided all the volunteers into two groups. One was to transport some treasure while the other group slept, and vice versa the next day. In this fashion, the treasure was transported out of Smarag's cave almost continually.

'Slowly, the great pile in the cavern was whittled down to a small heap of coins, while a new pile grew just outside the entrance, in accordance with the Doctor's plans to have as much of the treasure as far away from Smaragor as possible before Smarag returned. The people of Gubril worked like ants, carting treasure and empty wheelbarrows to and fro all day and all night long.

'Such was the astounding progress that the people of Gubril made, that Smarag's hoard was shifted a third of the way from Smaragor to Gubril in a month. Half a month later, it was halfway to Gubril. But then Smarag returned.

'The once great dragon was indeed a sorry sight. Gone were his strength and arrogance and confidence. His armour was dented, tarnished and scratched. His silken suit was in tatters. His sword was dull and blunt. His crown was bent, and sat lopsidedly. His rings were lost. His wings were frayed, his spines crooked or broken; his scales

gleamed no more. He could only breathe out a puff of smoke. He had gone out to challenge the authority of greater dragons, and he had failed miserably.

'Smarag screeched out loud in anger when he saw that his cherished treasure had been stolen. He circled the golden mountain roaring and bellowing. Then he saw the Doctor. 'You deceived me!'

'No. Smarag. You deceived yourself!' the Doctor called out.

'You gave me cursed armour and a cursed sword!'

'They were indeed magical, but only if used by those with goodness in their hearts!'

You promised me victory!'

'I gave you the opportunity, but you threw it away!'

'I have lost everything because of you! I will have my vengeance!' Smarag swooped down towards the pile, screaming and puffing smoke. People scattered in all directions, but the Doctor remained where he stood, between the pile and the incoming dragon.

'Come and get me, then!' the Doctor cried, his arms spread wide. Smarag hurtled along, surging forwards faster and faster.

'Just when it seemed that a collision was inevitable, the Doctor leapt up and scampered over the mound of treasure. He had ordered that it be built high and steep, and now it appeared that his plans would be his undoing. The Doctor struggled up the peak and tumbled down the other side, at the same moment that Smarag, unable to alter his path due to all the armour and treasure laden upon him, rammed into the side of the mountain.

'Gold coins exploded outwards in a golden shower. There was a deafening crash like the sound of thunder, and treasure scurried afterwards. The Doctor lay on the other side, motionless; coins scattered on top of him. The people of Gubril feared that he might be dead. Tebren was first on the scene, rushing to the Doctor's side.

Weakly, the Doctor muttered something unintelligible, murmuring of stegosauri and apple pie. Tebren feared that he had suffered some damage to the head, but the Doctor soon got up. He climbed back up the pile of treasure, and came face to face with Smarag.

'On Smarag's face was a look of infinite sadness and confusion. 'Why?' his eyes seemed to say. 'I only wanted to be great,' Smarag

murmured, and his eyes fell closed.

'The people wanted to rush in and beat at Smarag, but the Doctor forbade this. On his orders they dragged his body all the way back to Smaragor, where it was placed, alongside a small pile of treasure. The mountain was sealed, its caves filled in with rocks, and renamed Mount Hagoth, as it had been called before.

'The rest of the treasure was moved back to Gubril. The Doctor gave each person in the town and in the region a share of the treasure, so that all were 'comfortably well off' as the Doctor put it. The rest he decreed be used in the fight to remove the other dragons and demons from the Land. The Doctor put aside none for himself originally, but the people of Gubril insisted, and gave him a substantial portion.

'They asked that the Doctor stay to help them fight the other dragons. 'No,' he replied, 'I have done enough here already. You have the capability to continue the fight against oppression. Your destiny is in your own hands. Farewell, good people of Gubril. I shall return, one day.' And then the Doctor left.'

The story was over. It was getting late, but the children were only just starting to nod off. The bonfire was put out, and the people of the village shuffled off to bed. The Storyteller rented a room at the inn.

The next day, the Storyteller waved goodbye to the people of the village. He accepted no payment for his performance. He did it only for the satisfaction he got from telling a good tale. He enjoyed a hearty breakfast, though.

He put on his huge dusty patchwork coat and strode off down the road on his long lanky legs. He disappeared over the hill, and was gone. There was a noise of roaring dragons or rolling thunder that was soon lost in the wind, and replaced by birdsong.

Eurydice's Reprieve

Greg Gick

It wasn't like he had really known her.

It was tragic, of course, absolutely tragic. To perish in such a horrible, horrible manner. His only consolation was that she probably didn't even realize what was truly happening. But now they had time – time to warn Earth about the Daleks and save billions, perhaps trillions of other lives. The loss of one, however innocent, couldn't delay them for a second. And it wasn't like he had really known her. A week, barely, if that.

Steven was leaning against a bulkhead, hand over his face, breathing heavily. It seemed strange that he should be so stricken, seeing as he had known her no longer than the Doctor had, but humans could be astonishingly emotional at the oddest times. That was part of the reason they so repelled and fascinated him. And as a space pilot Steven Taylor knew well what happened to an unprotected human body exposed to the vacuum. That young man Vyon looked sad, also knowing what a terrible death Katarina and that roguish lout – what was his name again? Bilson? Something like that – had just experienced. But neither dared let it slow them down.

A daughter of the gods. I shall always remember her as a daughter of the gods.

He wondered why that particular thought came to him. Steven was already being lead away, head still buried and shoulders shaking, and the Doctor knew he should be following. Instead, he found himself peering out the nearest porthole, looking vainly for a sign, a glimpse, anything that might give him a last view of his would-be companion.

Unsurprisingly, he could see nothing. The sudden explosion of air into space naturally would've shunted the bodies out of the range of even his vision in the opaque darkness. Not that there would have been that much to see, anyway. All that was left now was for whatever freeze-dried bits of flesh, bone and gristle that remained to be

captured by the gravity of whatever planet they might float across, to enter the atmosphere and be reduced down to cinder and ash and, finally, into nothing at all.

And Orpheus turned and Eurydice vanished back into the mist of Hades, he thought.

But Eurydice had been the wife of Orpheus. And he had barely known Katarina at all. Surely one life lost compared to the innumerable ones that would die if the Daleks completed their Time Destructor was hardly worth the time to mourn over. Especially a mere slip of a girl born over four thousand years ago. And it wasn't like he had known her. Not like he had known Susan and Vicki and Steven and Barbara and even Chesterton. He hadn't really known her at all.

So why did he feel like crying?

Ilium burned.

The city known to its inhabitants and later generations as Troy had finally been breached. For ten long, blood-filled years its men had fought and died, and all for an empty-headed fading beauty with a growing weight problem and whose major concern in life was the condition of her nails. Never mind that Menelaus had figured out years ago that having his spouse kidnapped by some acne-scarred, hormone-driven teenage shepherd had been the best thing that ever happened to him. Never mind that for the past two years Paris' only thought was how soon he could dump this bitch for that cute little Scythian masseuse. One does not just take one's trophy wife without facing the consequences. Principles had to be upheld, after all. And so there was war and death, and widows' wails, and the last sights of men being ravens beginning to pick at their internal organs.

Until the strange god arrived. Then everything changed.

Currently the god was watching the TARDIS' monitor, sadly observing his handiwork. The Greeks were still pouring from the great Wooden Horse, finally able to satiate their decade-old urge to loot and plunder Troy's resources – and not just material ones. He was glad the monitor's audio was off; although he knew it was impossible he had a slight fear of being able to hear the women's screams even over the roaring of the flames. He did hope Vicki would be all right. Aenaes

would survive, of course, but history said nothing about Prince Troilus and a lovesick girl from the 22nd Century.

The Doctor flipped off the monitor. Enough. Despite his better judgment, Vicki was old enough now to make her own decisions. She would have to live with any consequences. He hoped she would be happy with them. Right now there were other things more important to deal with.

Like a dying companion.

Quickly the old man started the TARDIS into flight, not caring at the moment just what coordinates were set. Unwise, of course, as this could very well propel them straight into the heart of a sun, but he trusted the Ship to know what to avoid. Leaving the console room, he marched down a corridor with remarkable swiftness for a man his apparent age, opened a door, and examined what he found inside.

Steven was lying semi-conscious in bed, stripped to the waist of the ancient armour he had worn. His torso was criss-crossed with ugly crimson stains. Wringing out a washrag, Katarina mopped up the clotting blood as gently as she could, but even in his half-conscious state the space pilot let out a groan.

'Your servant is injured more grievously than I thought, lord,' the young Trojan slave girl said in her quiet voice. 'I fear he shall soon die.'

The Doctor regarded her silently. Not only did there seem to be nothing to say to that, he was beginning to wonder if it had been a wise decision to bring this child on board. Granted, she had been a great help in caring for Steven thus far, but she was of such a primitive culture. Uneducated, unscientific, superstitious; Katarina was simply incapable of understanding what was happening to her. Even Chesterton's ridiculous era at least possessed the concept of space and time travel. How could this mere girl even begin to comprehend such things?

Katarina rinsed the washcloth in a bowl sitting next to her, found it too filthy for further use, and discarded it for a fresh one. Carefully she swabbed Steven's perspiring forehead, looking down at him sympathetically. Over her eighteen summers she had seen many men die of far lesser injuries; and thought it a pity this one should have to cross the Styx so soon. He was rather good-looking in a way. Not that

a mere handmaiden such as herself would ever presume such things of the priest of a god, but it was a pity nonetheless. Still, if the man had served his god well, would he not soon find himself in the Place of Perfection? Or even better: 'Can you not heal him with your godly power my lord?'

'I'm not a god,' the Doctor replied tersely, checking Steven's pulse. Katarina blinked and would have laughed if she dared. This being not a god? How ridiculous! True, she had never heard of any god named 'Dok-tor,' nor of any who took the form of such an old man with such strange raiment. But many were the gods of land, sea, and sky, and could they not appear in any form they wished? His strange knowledge, his magical temple so small and unprepossessing on the outside, yet so glorified within – what else could these be but the trappings of a god? Even if the altar did look odd and too clumsy to hold even a lamb down as a decent sacrifice.

The Doctor caught the look in Katarina's eyes and sighed. This simply would not do. He opened his mouth to begin yet another lecture on his mortality, but then closed it. What good would it do him? She was going to believe as she wished. The best thing would be to get Steven the appropriate medical attention, then take this girl back to her proper time and space and soon as possible. He cocked his head thoughtfully, regarding her. *A pretty human, he thought, with her warm eyes and squarish face. She deserves far more than a life of slavery.*

'Child…' he began slowly.

'Yes, lord?'

'Where is your family? As soon as I have cured my... servant, I will take you to them.'

Katarina shook her dark tresses negatively. 'I have no family, my lord. My mother was sold to a foreign king when I was but four. My father died on the battlefield, and refused to acknowledge me, anyway.'

'I see,' said the Doctor. For a moment he wondered if her father might not have been old Priam's son Hector himself. That would explain a great deal of how she would have been attached to the Royal House. 'Well, then, I can take you anywhere you may wish to go. You are a

slave no longer; you are free. Why would you wish to remain with an old man?'

The young Trojan's eyes glowed. 'Because you can take me to the Place of Perfection! The Elysian Fields!' she breathed in awe. 'All long to reach that place after we die, where the trees are always green and the fields ever in harvest. All that awaits me otherwise is the Plain of Asphodel, where the dead are but phantoms of themselves, their lives empty and meaningless.' Her reverie was cut off as Steven groaned again. He was thrashing, moaning in his sleep. Taking his shoulders firmly she forced him still, then, taking up the white, creamy antibiotics the Doctor had given her (calling them herbs), she once again began tenderly treating his wounds.

'I see,' the Doctor repeated and turned his attention to his companion. He would attend to Katarina later. Steven's pulse was becoming far too weak and he already had a massive fever. Infection had undoubtedly already set in. But the Ship simply didn't have the necessary apparatus to help. Where could he go?

'Time Lord.'

Only half-listening, the Doctor muttered, 'Not now, my dear,' toward the feminine voice and tried to examine Steven's eyes.

'Time Lord.'

The Doctor froze. It hadn't been Katarina that was speaking.

Steven was no longer breathing. He was paused in mid-thrash, a soundless moan frozen on his lips. Nor, for that matter, was Katarina. She stood unmoving, an arm extended out over Steven's torso, perfectly still; eyes open but unseeing. *Localised chronal stasis field*, he instantly realised. Somehow Time had been stopped around them.

'Time Lord,' the female voice repeated, impatiently, from behind him.

The Doctor wheeled. Floating cross-legged some two metres off the floor was possibly the most beautiful humanoid he had ever seen. With long, flowing red hair and eyes of purest gold, skin perfect and without blemish, she looked rather disgruntledly at him. But just because she was beautiful didn't mean he appreciated the invasion. 'Who are you, and what are you doing on my Ship?' he demanded.

'My true name would be unpronounceable to three-dimensional

creatures such as you. For now, you may call me Aquala. I am a Chronovore.'

The Doctor blanched.

'Fear not, Time Lord; on this day we mean you no harm. This day. I am here as a representative of my race, to offer you a… reward.'

'Reward? Reward for what?'

For a service you have yet to render to my kind.'

'*Yet* to offer?' The Doctor couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'Do you have any idea what you're saying? You're trying to reverse the laws of cause and effect; creating a paradox!'

'Mere temporal linearity means nothing to us, Time Lord. But if it will help, see our offer as an – hmm – "advance payment" if you will. Part of a contract that ensures your future actions for us. Or, if you prefer, do not accept our reward at all. It makes no difference.'

The Doctor frowned, took hold of his lapels. 'And just what is this "reward" you so gallantly offer for my future services? And will you kindly come down from up there? You're giving me a crick in my neck!'

Aquala shrugged and, extending down her feet, lowered herself to the TARDIS' floor. 'Her.' The Chronovore pointed towards the frozen Katarina. 'Your desire to return her to her proper time and place will never come to pass. In less than four of your relative days, she will be dead.'

'*What*?'

'She will be dead,' Aquala repeated remorselessly. 'It is part of the Web of Time; it cannot be changed without massive ramifications to the very nature of Space and Time. But afterwards it will always be your regret that you never knew her; that you held her primitiveness in such contempt that you never even tried to become less than a stranger to her.'

'Then –' the Doctor started slowly, 'then you mean to prevent her death?'

'No. As has been said, that cannot be altered without precipitating a chaos even we could not withstand. Unknown to you, at this time the Daleks are busy building a Time Destructor.'

The Doctor's eyes widened. 'No…' he began.

'Indeed. And if they should succeed in completing it without your interference, the entire structure of Time and Space, our very food source itself, would die as the Destructor would eventually overwhelm the power of even the Children of Skaro. We would starve to death. We cannot permit that. We *will* not permit that. But you are destined to prevent this from happening – if and only if this mortal dies at the proper time. Her death will buy you the time needed to get to the planet Earth. If she should survive, the very seconds you would spend helping her recover would delay you enough that the Daleks' minions would find you. The human girl must die. Still, we can...' and here the Chronovore paused a second, her body taking a deep breath, as if trying to find the proper words, 'We can *delay* her death for a while.'

'Delay it? Delay it how?' Then recognition dawned. 'Of course. You propose to make us jump our time-track, much as I did when I visited the Morok Empire.'

Aquala nodded. 'Just so, Time Lord. But not a *forward* jump, as you made. Rather, if you will, a *sideways* one. It will not be as you did, where you were able to return and wipe out that timeline you visited. It will instead be as if you *sidestepped* it temporarily. Your adventures, if any, will still take place in the timeline you inhabit; you will not be able to create any parallel ones or alter your future. But when the time comes you and your companions will be returned to this particular point in your life, to resume your journeys as Time has decreed.'

The Doctor folded his hands, brought them to his lips. 'And just how long will this be for?'

'From your perspective – one relative year. Unless in your foolishness, you or your companions, even the girl, are killed. Then you will be instantly returned to this point.'

The Doctor pursed his lips. 'The High Council is going to have apoplexy if they learn of this.'

'The relations between you and your people are of no consequence to us, Time Lord.'

'But my relationship to this poor child is?'

Aquala shrugged again. 'As I said, whether you accept it or not makes little difference to us. It is a gift, freely offered. If you choose

not to accept it, that is your prerogative. But she still must die.'

'Hrmmm.' The Doctor turned, walked back over to his companions, still frozen in the time stasis field Aquala had invoked around them. He looked at them for a long moment. Then: 'My companion, Steven. You will heal him, as well.'

Aquala shrugged yet again. 'If you wish,' she yawned disinterestedly. She was becoming very bored with this tetchy Ephemeral. 'But when you are all returned to this time-point, his wounds will return as before.'

The Doctor was silent, gazing at Katarina, thinking. What this creature suggested was against everything he had hitherto believed in. It violated the very Laws of Time. And yet... and yet... he brushed Katarina's cheek absently, lost in thought... and yet could he rightfully deny this child the opportunity to learn her place in a universe larger and more wonderful than she could ever truly conceive? Than even he conceived? How could he knowingly condemn her to death without giving her that chance? But nor could he ever tell her the truth. The temptation to try and alter the future would be too strong for her, if not for him. And even he knew the folly of defying a Chronovore.

'Very well,' he snapped, turning to face the Chronovore sharply. 'One year. And if there is any Being Katarina believes in truly out there, may he or she forgive me for not doing more.'

Aquala nodded. And vanished.

'Doctor!' Katarina cried. 'Doctor, your servant!'

Steven was sitting up in bed, staring, his body as smooth as a newborn's. He shook his head disbelievingly. 'I was certain I was dead, there,' he muttered, and then saw Katarina. She was smiling delightedly and the space pilot couldn't help noticing how pretty she was.

'Glad to have you back, my boy,' the Doctor said, patting Steven on the shoulder.

'Glad to be back, Doctor,' Steven replied, not taking his eyes off Katarina. 'Is this the new crew member?'

The Doctor smiled. Strangely sadly, Katarina thought. 'Yes. This is the new crew member.'

Their first stop was Io, three and a half million years before the first dinosaur drew breath. Steven couldn't believe they didn't need a spacesuit to go outside. 'The solar system at this time is very different from the one you know, my boy,' the Doctor explained. 'When Venus finally became too hot and Mondas ripped itself from orbit, everything changed. The ancestors of the Waro took refuge in Neptune's caves and caverns. The Martians adapted to their newly cold planet, becoming the first reptiles in the universe to do so. And,' he pointed upwards, 'the Helidons started their long migration from the gas seas of Jupiter to a place that has never been found. Never.'

The Doctor watched intently as his companions craned their necks upward. Steven by virtue of his very era had already had much experience with extraterrestrial life before coming aboard, but how would ignorant Katarina respond? *She'll think they're monsters, he thought grimly, she'll scream and run into the Ship…*

And just then the thin atmosphere of Io turned emerald with giant luminescent dirigibles fifteen metres floating across the sky with a dozen feather-tipped tendrils flowing like great kites behind them. Their great shapeless forms undulated with the exotic gases that inflated their thin, sheet-like skins, and the air was filled with a low, rhythmic humming from thin membranes within their tentacles vibrating what little air they could – the Helidons, singing a last goodbye to their home and its moons.

'They're... beautiful,' Katarina breathed.

Steven personally felt they looked more like really big green blobs, but never got to voice the thought as Katarina suddenly darted forward, waving her arms and crying at the top of her voice: 'Here! Here we are! We're down here!'

'Katie!' Steven barked, moving forward, but the Doctor suddenly gripped his arm and held him back. However the creature heard her with no aural organs to speak of immediately apparent, the Doctor never knew. But one slowly came to a stop, paused, then lowered itself carefully down towards the surface, reaching out a tendril toward the eager girl. Its tip was as large as her head.

It was like looking at a china doll standing before a whale. Gently

the tendril touched Katarina's face, then brushed curiously against her hair. It resumed its probe, touching her shoulders, her arms, her bosom.

'Soft,' the young Trojan was whispering, running her hands up and down the Helion's tentacle. 'Soft, like the finest linen.' Then, with a flick of a tendril that almost seemed a goodbye, the Helion slowly lifted itself into the sky again, rejoining its fellows as the humming reached a crescendo. Then they were mere green specks against the tiny sun, and were seen no more.

Katarina watched, eyes wide. It took the Doctor a moment to realize she was sobbing with happiness.

And so they went on their way. The Doctor showed her the universe. She watched as a sun in Andromeda was born, and witnessed the entrancing mating dances of the Sooth. She swam with the Porpoise Men of Cetacean IV and talked to the Ice Trees of Myrann. She knew the secrets of the Cyrmaron Nebula and plumbed the depths of Cyrsu's Bottomless Ocean.

And then there were the adventures. Oh, the adventures. Drahvins on Zessilyn, cyborg lions in 23rd Century Africa. Rescuing the sluglike K'dur from the reptilian Na'hash. Comforting the last Venusian as it died. They met Soroth, first God-King and Father of the Draconian civilization, and saved Benjamin Franklin from a time-travelling autograph hound who wanted him to sign nine hundred copies of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. She saw everything through the eyes of a child, and the Doctor began to feel as if Susan herself were with him again. She never quite got over the idea the Doctor was a god, and finally, after the umpteenth time of trying to explain it to her, he gave it up. It wasn't too bad when you got used to it. And, if during late-night walks he would occasionally see Steven stealing into her quarters – well, there were times it was more appropriate for even the Captain of the Ship to turn a blind eye to things. Katarina would see eight new races evolve, four die, run from a ghostly Hessian with a pumpkin for a head, and dance on stage with some entertainer named Presley when the TARDIS materialized during a concert, only to get booted off when the Doctor adamantly refused to shake his pelvis. And then one day after

stopping a cluster of Mechanoids from re-terraforming the inhabited planet of Khartid, they entered the Ship to find a red-haired, golden-eyed woman waiting. 'It's time,' she said.

'Doctor?' asked Katarina, 'Who is this?'

The Doctor closed his eyes wearily. 'Just someone who has come to finish paying off a debt, my dear.'

Steven didn't know why, but placed his arm about the young Trojan protectively. 'What does she want?' he demanded.

Aquala raised an eyebrow. 'You never told them, Time Lord? Ah, well, no matter. He won't remember a thing, anyway.'

The Doctor looked up sharply. 'Won't remember? But you said this was my reward for services rendered!'

'It *is*. But you won't remember any of it until *after* the service. And he won't remember it at all.' She gestured carelessly toward Steven. '*He* is not the one we are indebted to.'

'But– but this is monstrous!' protested the Doctor. 'Steven cares about Katarina! I care about Katarina! You can't–'

'I can do whatever I wish, Doctor,' the Chronovore snorted. 'And as for the human, his wishes are irrelevant to me. You accepted the reward; we have paid our debt. Now it is time for–'

'*Wait*!' And Katarina was stepping forward boldly, confidently; a young woman who knew her place in the universe and was no longer afraid of it. 'Just what is this all about? You may have finished a debt owed the Doctor, but now you owe me an explanation. What is this the Doctor has never said to me?'

Aquala told her.

'You– did– WHAT???' Steven roared, clenching his fists and bodily wheeling the Doctor to face him. 'Made a deal with that monster to– to–'

'Steven,' Katarina said softly, 'please.' She reached out, removed the space pilot's hands from the Doctor's lapels, gently turned her lord and god around to face her. 'Is this true, Doctor? You did this so I could live another year?'

The Doctor could only nod mutely, tears beginning to form in the corners of his eyes. Drat it all. He was supposed to be above this.

Katarina stared at him a moment, eyes wide, then, very slowly, a very tender, loving smile crossed her face. She embraced the Doctor tightly. 'Thank you,' she said.

'But my dear, I–'

'You what, Doctor? Gave me a chance to see things I even dreamed about before? Showed me worlds beyond Zeus' imagination? And all for me? So I could live and learn and love you both? How can I *not* thank you for that? And now–' – she took a deep breath – 'and now I owe *you*. By taking this gift you gave me and accepting its consequences. What else can I do for my god but that?'

'Katie...' Steven started warningly.

She hushed him like a child. 'It is all right, Steven,' she said quietly. 'If I understand this creature correctly, you will no longer remember me after this. Nor I what I shared with you. But, I promise you, this – I will *know*. I may not remember, but I will know.' Gently she kissed him and Steven put his arms around her.

'Oh, bugger this,' Aquala snorted. 'I'm late for a party as it is. Thank you, Doctor, for accepting our gift. But our debt is ended now.'

'A question more, goddess,' asked Katarina.

The Chronovore sighed. 'Ask it.'

'What is– what is on the Other Side of the Styx? Will the Place of Perfection be there?'

Aquala was silent. Then: 'I don't know. Even my people do not know what lies beyond Eternity's Door.'

'I see. Thank you.' Katarina turned back to the Doctor. 'Goodbye, my lord.'

'Goodbye, my de–'

'–ervant is wounded more grievously than I thought, lord.' Katarina was saying as she gently swabbed Steven's bloody chest. 'I fear he will soon die.'

A sudden shudder ran through the Doctor's body that had nothing to do with Steven's injuries. There had been something, he thought; something was not right here. But what? It filled his mind, as thick but insubstantial as fog...

The girl. It had to be the girl. Although undoubtedly gentle and

possessing a good heart, she was so primitive, so superstitious. Science was as alien a concept to her as his internal anatomy would be. She couldn't possibly begin to understand the principles and responsibilities of time travel. She would have to be returned, to her home time and space if at all possible. Yes, hard as it sounded, that was the answer. The best thing to do was to get Steven the appropriate medical attention and then be rid of this child at the earliest conceivable opportunity.

They saved the Universe, of course. It was what they did. It had been a long, hard battle, but in the end the Time Destructor was itself destroyed and the Daleks set back... well, hopefully forever. Of course, there had been prices. That young Trojan Katarina, for example. Pity that. So young and innocent. She never even began to understand what was happening to her. But it wasn't like they had really known her. They had had much more time to get to know Sara, who had joined them in the midst of their fight stayed with them six months, battling androids and Voords and other menaces before the Daleks finally caught up to them. In the end, she died too. But that was the way things went. But they had the time to mourn her. Time and TARDIS moved on. But they hadn't known Katarina at all. Not in the least.

And then one day Jo Grant walked into the Doctor's laboratory and wondered why he looked as if he had been crying.

She felt curiously unafraid as plague-hued Charon pulled to the shore, reached out a skeletal, crimson-robed hand, and gently helped her into the ferry. She sat down on the rough wooden bench as the Ferryman of the Dead pushed away from shore, and for a few moments there was only the sound of the punt being continually steeped and then pulled from the brackish waters. 'Steven?' she asked at last.

Charon paused, then said in his sepulchral voice, 'Not for a while.'

'The Doctor?'

'Even longer. Any of him.'

'Good.'

Charon pointed.

'Elysian Fields off the starboard.'

Brought to Book

MARK PHIPPEN & PAUL LEONARD

Very slowly, the Answerer became aware that he was no longer dead. His first sensation was the sun on his leaves: an irregular, itchy warmth. Then, gradually, the cold, crystal feel of the stony soil around his roots.

Discomfort, pushing aside comfort. Nibbling at drowsiness.

Discomfort: life.

He opened the buds that protected his eyes, and saw a valley. It was familiar, yet strange, as if he had never quite seen a valley in these colours before. The clumped talkerplants were copper-bright, the bare soil between them blood red, laced with narrow amber and gold trails. Tiny gildenshraves, shimmering like flames, moved along the trails, gradually slowing down as he watched.

In the distance, there was a lake, serene pink in the dawn: on a spur above it, there was a small, squat, rust-coloured shape.

Night Watcher.

Yes. Night Watcher had promised he would wait. Wait until...

The Answerer was beginning to remember.

Suddenly, there was movement amongst the crimson grass of the valley: a flickering thing, like a drifting seed in the breeze, half-seen, not quite resting.

Searching.

It came closer.

Two. There were two of them. One was quite still now, crosslegged, courteously sitting to one side so as not to shade The Answerer's leaves. The other flickered, sometimes occluding the sun, gesturing, making half-comprehensible sounds.

'- talk to a *plant*? ... all *day*? -'

Soon, at a twitch from the still one, the speaker left, seed-drifting down the hillside. The other waited, the shadows on his face moving as the sun rolled towards the zenith.

The Answerer remembered that he could speak.

'Doc-tor?'

To the waiting one, the syllables must have been as slow as the wind: but his head twitched immediately in response.

The Answerer had to tell the story, then. It was unavoidable. But the memories now were like a pack of cards, dog-eared, stained, the rules of the game long ago forgotten. It had been too long ago: he had been too young. Incredibly, impossibly young. And he had been first-life: no, something before first-life, something so basic, so empty -

Human.

Yes. That was the name for it.

Associations rushed at him, like a swarm of insects: the black skull-ship - the red monsters - the strangers - the blue box.

The sun was already near the zenith, the hills were russet with heat-mist: he must begin.

'You,' began The Answerer, 'were there, Doctor. When I died. You missed so much, understood so little.'

The story went on through the long, quick, heat of the afternoon, its twists and turns as many as those of the tiny, tickling mites that moved amongst The Answerer's roots. The Doctor remained absolutely still as he listened, the shadows on his face moving with the moving sun. Once he twitched, maybe to dislodge an insect.

At length, the sun faded, the telling of the story came to an end. Slowly, The Answerer's leaves furled, his vision faded, his voice stopped. He saw the Doctor move, heard his voice, the words fast, blurring, almost incomprehensible: 'But you haven't explained -'

'Not - to - ex-plain.' The Answerer struggled with his stiffening voice box. 'To tell - is - a - sto-ry.'

The cooling of soil, the small contractions of grains around the roots. The soft, soft touch of night-mist.

Somewhere a tiny, inconsequential creature squeaked. 'I need to know - need to know - need to know,' it said.

The Answerer no longer cared to reply. Death was coming: the story was over for today. He felt the cool, slow, sleep-comfort of the night-mist rise around him.

Comfort: death.

The cooling of soil, the small contractions of grains around the roots. Water forming on the leaves, soothing. Mist: no stars: no sounds.

The peace of night.

In the morning, perhaps, The Answerer would live, and tell more of the story. Or perhaps the leaves would open, unsentient, to the sun.

A clearing in the jungle.

Birdsong fills the air, and the only movement is the gentle swaying of the tall trees that circle the glade. Perfect peace.

A peace that is shattered by a raucous noise, like that of a large, elephantine creature calling for its mate, that reverberates around the clearing.

The birds take their leave as the ground begins to shake, and the smaller trees that line one edge of the clearing are pushed apart to admit a large, elephantine creature, its trunk high in the air as it calls for its mate. Standing for a while in the centre of the clearing, the creature eventually moves on to continue its search.

But before the clearing can resume its peaceful resting, there is another noise, like the modulated sound of a key scraped along piano wire.

A figure was manifesting itself in the clearing. A humanoid, old but distinguished. He wore fine robes and a high collar around his neck, and had the bearing of someone who was very important indeed.

It was only the black and bloody eye, the torn sleeve and broken collar that diminished the effect.

As he fully materialised, the figure checked a small device held in his right hand. Nodding with satisfaction, the figure looked around him, as if searching for a way out of the clearing.

But before he could get his bearings, the silence was shattered yet again by a noisy wheezing and groaning. Looking around in horror, the man watched as two more figures joined him in the clearing, appearing, as had he, from nowhere.

As the figures formed, his eyed widened in horror as he saw the tall, horned, red-skinned creatures that stood before him. He turned to run, hoping to reach the edge of the clearing, but the new arrivals were quick. In two strides of their long legs, the creatures were upon him,

bearing him to the floor.

The man screamed as one of the creatures cupped his terrified face in its hands. His face was burning, smouldering at the touch of the red creature, which held its grip tight as the man's face blackened and burned until his features were unrecognisable.

The man was still alive, still screaming, as, while the first creature held him down, the second clawed at his chest with its long talons, cutting deep into his flesh and pulling apart his ribcage with a loud crack.

The creature growled with obvious delight as it found the man's heart. The man's *hearts*. The screaming stopped as it plucked first one, then another from the open chest, to be replaced by a wheezing groaning sound as the three figures disappeared as if they had never been there.

And then the TARDIS arrived.

As the clearing recovered from this intrusion it began making tentative steps to return to its peaceful normality. Returning birds began singing again, accompanied by the gentle rustle of the wind in the trees. But this attempt did not succeed, as moments later the doors of the blue box swung open, disgorging three chattering figures.

The first, a tall, rather stout man in a multi-coloured patchwork-quilt of a coat strode out purposefully, looking around him with a look of satisfaction. The second was a young, attractive, dark haired girl who followed the first man confidently, looking around in fascination at the variety of plant life in the area. The third was another man, stocky, handsome but less sure of himself.

'So remind me, Peri,' the third arrival said to the girl, 'just why are we here again?'

'I've told you,' Peri replied, 'the Doctor needs to research what happened on the *Vipod Mor*.'

'I know that, but why *here*, in the middle of a jungle?' The man, who answered to the name of Shellingbourne Grant, cast his eyes around, but could see nothing other than trees, plants and birds. Despite his words, however, Grant gave a shudder. There *was* something else here. He could feel it.

'Because this jungle,' the Doctor put in, 'happens to be home of the most complete library in the Universe. Here on Charrat you'll find every scrap of information, every work of fiction, every reference work ever committed to paper. *Everything*.'

'Including the creation of the Universe following the destruction of the *Vipod Mor*?' Grant asked.

'That, and how it ties in with what happened on Terminus.' The Doctor nodded. 'I've always wondered about that. Things I should have known. Something as important as that...'

'You can't know everything, Doctor!' Peri pointed out.

'I should have known *that*. The creation of the Universe. Hardly in the same league as remembering your Kings and Queens, is it?' The Doctor was pouting. He looked like a bad loser after a disastrous game of Feliam Poker, thought Grant.

'So where is it then, this wondrous library?' Grant was growing impatient with the Doctor's self-admonishment.

The Doctor licked a finger and held it aloft in the breeze, finally pointing to a slight gap in the trees that surrounded clearing. 'That way,' he said, making for the opening. 'Come along!'

'Why do they make it so hard to find, Doctor?' Peri asked his back as it marched purposefully ahead of them.

'Membership of this library is somewhat, shall we say, exclusive,' the Doctor yelled back over his shoulder. 'They don't want any old race gaining the answers to life, the Universe and everything. Besides... aha!'

The Doctor had stopped because, on emerging from the passageway between the trees, the trio had been confronted with their first sight of the library. Sitting atop a cascading waterfall was the most impressive building Peri, and, if he was truthful, Grant had ever seen in their lives.

It was a potpourri of styles, amber minarets, high green crystal spires, sharp as swords; brick arches and a vast wooden dome; flying buttresses in rainbow glass. The water that fed the falls seemed to flow through the building in jet-black rivulets, emerald swirls and white-mist cascades. Trees grew inside, breaking the complex lines of the

roofs, making dark canopies over stone walls, shading the dome, at their highest forming a living spire. Huge blooms hung, roseate and crenulated, and coloured birds glittered like jewels as they moved amongst the petals.

A path led up the falls, at first rough stone, then smooth brick, and finally an improbable outdoor Persian carpet, purple and sea-blue, with an iridescent sheen like the blue of peacock feathers.

'Wow!' said Peri. 'How do we get in?'

'We knock on the door, would you believe?' The Doctor flashed her a grin.

'Shouldn't they have some kind of protection?' Grant asked. 'I mean with all that knowledge in one place, surely *some* of it could be of use to, er, the wrong kind of people?'

'Oh, it will have protection,' the Doctor replied. 'A nifty temporal grid designed by the Time Lords. So nifty in fact that I think I must have had a hand in it at some point. But it doesn't yet, if you get my drift.'

Peri was puzzled. 'But what's to stop races capable of time travel from popping back to this time, before it was protected and making off with anything they want?'

'The fact that we know they didn't!' the Doctor replied with another grin, which was returned in kind by Peri, but with a frown from Grant.

'Don't worry,' Peri whispered to Grant, 'you'll get used to it.'

Grant watched as Peri quickened her step to keep up with the Doctor who was marching purposely onward toward the library.

'Not if I can help it,' he muttered under his breath.

The past *hurts*.

It is a very real pain, not some overstated metaphor. Memories stab at you like daggers, cutting deep. In an effort to outrun the pain you hurtle forward, living only in the now and looking only to the future. But there comes a time when you can't run any more; when your body and mind conspire to bring you to a halt, payback for the years of abuse you've subjected them to over the years. The past again. It'll always

catch you.

He is a man of evil. Born of badness. Created by cruelty.

Here he sits in his black skull-ship in his black skullcap. A cruel grin splits his face, his eyes sparkle. He is high on anticipation, so close to his prey. If ever a man could be said to live in the past, this is he. Which is ironic, because he has little of own. What he does have, however, are memories of another life, the life of the very man he has come here for. But he wants more.

But there are ways and means, if one is patient. A *right* way of doing things.

There were times, he remembered, when his hatred blinded him to attention to detail, like a feral thing, unthinking, wild. Driven by his desire to see his enemy destroyed.

This is a man who knows how painful the past can be.

Imagine remembering your own creation. Imagine remembering your death. Now imagine they are the same event. The death throws of one life become the first kicks of another. Life born from death.

But he had not been the only one to emerge from the maelstrom of that death. There had been another, purer, more true to the original. A white to his black.

Since that very first day on Skaro, not a day had passed that he had not plotted to defeat his nemesis, his mirror. His creator.

Now, after centuries of battle, a new plan. Clever, subtle, restrained.

Strike in the past, lay a trap for a man who isn't even aware of this sworn enemy of the future. A trap for a man who is perhaps more guilty than at any other time of his lives of taking steps that will lead to the creation of his foe. A neat circle.

Strike in the past. Because the past is what he craves.

He remembers flashes of another life, other *lives*, before this one, but he feels detached, like he is watching from afar. But these are his lives, and he wants them back.

He remembers lying on his back with his father, watching a meteor storm raging above, dreaming of exploring all that time and space could show him. He remembers, fleetingly, those first few steps into the Universe, remembers the shock upon realising what time had in store

for him. The weight of responsibility.

But pieces are missing, large chunks of his memory are hazy, unreadable. These should be *his* memories, yet they are blocked - from him, like a locked diary.

He remembers a trauma, a period of memory loss sometime in his eighth life. Could this be the reason? No, that can't be it - memories *since* then are just as inaccessible, while earlier ones sometimes surfaced; a kiss, an Earth woman - what her name? Grace? - as realisation dawned following regeneration, memories of his father resurfacing again. His father, finding him - Earth again - leaving the boy with him, watching as he took the youngster under his wing as he had never with his own son - as he *couldn't* have done with his own

These memories were the strongest, perhaps because they had touched him so deeply in his past life that no amount of wilful blocking on the part of his nemesis could possibly keep them from him.

But he should have them all. This life should be his. These *lives* should be his.

And if the Doctor fell for the bait here on Kar-Charrat, it would only be a matter of time.

A being who introduced himself as Elgin, the Chief Librarian, greeted the Doctor and his companions at the library. He was a thin, graceful, insect-like creature who reminded Peri of a butterfly: though he had no wings, his two pairs of long arms, shimmering with green and indigo, seemed to dance constantly, as if he hoped to fly. He seemed particularly pleased to see the Doctor, who, likewise, greeted the librarian warmly.

'It's good to see you again, Doctor,' Elgin said, extending a long, glimmering green, snake-like proboscis to touch the Doctor's face. 'It's been so long.'

'Even longer for me,' replied the Doctor, 'far too long.'

Big, dark, owl-like eyes blinked slowly in response.

The Time Lord introduced Peri and Grant, and the librarian told them that they had the run of the library for the duration of their stay.

The Doctor explained that he was here to research a particular subject about which there were several worrying gaps in his

knowledge.

'Well, you've come to the right place, Doctor,' assured Elgin, 'and what of your friends?'

The Doctor turned to Peri and Grant. 'I'm sure they can amuse themselves. Unless they fancy helping me in my research?'

Both Peri and Grant respectfully declined.

'Thought as much,' the Doctor grinned, 'There's plenty here to interest anyone. I'll come and find you when I'm done.'

'Okay, Doctor,' replied Peri, 'good luck.'

She and Grant watched the Time Lord and the librarian as they headed off up a carpeted staircase for the reference section, then looked at each other.

There was an awkward silence.

Peri was the first to speak. 'So, er, what do you feel like doing?'

Grant shrugged. 'I didn't even want to come here. Why couldn't the Doctor have dropped me off somewhere first?'

'This is important. The Doctor nearly made a terrible mistake.'

Grant was silent for a moment.

'I thought you'd forgotten about me.'

'We almost did,' Peri admitted. 'I'm sorry.'

'No, it's okay. It's no more than I deserve.'

Peri sighed. 'There must be something in the air.'

Grant was puzzled. 'What do you mean?'

'Self-pity. It's everywhere I turn.' Peri smiled. 'Anything interest you?' She pointed to the map of the library on the wall behind them.

Grant scanned the map, his eyes lighting up as found something that interested him.

'The "Alien Artefact Exhibition" sounds intriguing. Coming?'

Peri shook her head. 'No, you go. I'll just have a look around.'

Grant nodded, and started down a green-lit passageway.

Peri was about to walk away when he stopped and turned around. 'Oh, Peri.'

'Yes?'

'Take care.'

Peri smiled. 'You too.'

He had performed this task a thousand times.

Cataloguer Thrank sat in his office, methodically processing the latest acquisitions. Once catalogued, the books would be taken to Chief Librarian Elgin who would have the final decision on the categorisation of each item and arrange for it to be added to the collection.

Thrank would then add the catalogue entry to the main index on the library's computer system, and keep a hard copy of the records in his meticulously maintained filing system.

A thousand times Thrank had done this, but never once before had he found a body in his filing cabinet.

The body's face was badly burned, and had a terrible wound in its chest. Even with these horrific and disfiguring injuries, Thrank was sure that the man was a stranger. So where had he come from, and who had placed the body in the cabinet?

The answer to Thrank's queries came quicker than he could have hoped. Or wanted.

With a discordant wheezing and groaning, two large, horned red creatures appeared in front of him. Thrank could focus on nothing but the evil in their eyes.

That, and the two pairs of talons that came cutting through the air towards him.

Elgin showed the Doctor into the cosmology reference section, and directed him to the section dealing with Setna Streen, the *Vipod Mor*'s home planet.

The Doctor thanked him, and invited him to help with the research, knowing full well that the old librarian couldn't resist a spot of academic investigation.

As Elgin began to pull relevant books from the shelves, the Doctor took a moment to take a look around the department.

'I've never noticed that before.'

'What's that, Doctor?' Elgin's voice came from above, and the Doctor turned round to see him up a ladder, retrieving some of the higher books.

'The vines. Now I've noticed them, I can see they're all over the

place.'

'One of the small problems we encountered having chosen a jungle planet on which to build the library. The building is good and strong, but the jungle is stronger. We try to control the vines by trailing them around the building in these pipes,' he pointed to the large, silver pipes that ran around the length of the room at waist height. 'But really we are at the mercy of the forces of nature. I always joke that the jungle must be jolly interested in academic research if its *that* keen to get in.'

The Doctor laughed politely at what he knew was a rare, if rather weak, joke from the old librarian. 'You'll have to give it a library card soon.'

He was a thief.

Grant had long ago come to terms with that fact. He was comfortable with it. Of course, these days he was a *poor* thief, after having bought this, his latest identify. But being poor had made him more resourceful, and even here, amongst the confusion and the death, his mind was working overtime.

Priceless alien artefacts, here for the taking. Transport provided by the escape shuttles he had noticed marked on the map of the complex. An unimaginably wealthy future awaiting him. Actually, he would have a damn good try at imagining it. The thought made him giddy.

There were no guards, just the occasional passing Cataloguer who paid him no attention. He had been given the run of the place, trusted by virtue of being a companion of the Doctor. Well, not for much longer.

The exhibition was more fabulous than he could have imagined. Artefacts from the Universe over collected, catalogued and put into display cases that helpfully told Grant just how rare each item was on its homeworld. Each artefact alone would be enough to set him up for life. Or *this* life at least - there would be others, now that money was no question.

Grant stepped up to the nearest display case. It contained an original copy of *The Ambuehl Lores*, its worth unimaginable. It would do for starters.

Looking round for a jemmy, Grant's eyes alighted on a metal bracket that held the pipes that he had noticed snaked their way

around the complex to the wall. The bracket was loose: It shouldn't take too much pulling... there. It came away in his hand.

Placing the thinnest side of the bracket inside the small gap next to the lock of the glass cabinet, Grant pushed against the other end in an attempt to force the door open.

There was a smashing sound, and for a moment Grant thought that he had smashed the glass of the door, but he realised that the cabinet remained intact. The sound had come from behind him.

Spinning round, Grant saw to his horror that the pipe that had previously been held up by the bracket had now fallen to the floor, where it had split open. Emerging from the split were the tendrils of a plant, snaking their way towards him.

Grant opened his mouth to scream, but before he could make a sound, the roof above him burst open in several places, admitting several more tendrils, which joined the others from the pipe in advancing on him.

Grant looked at the door, but it was too far away, with the tendrils between him and freedom. He began backing up, but he found his back against the cabinet he had been trying to open. There was nowhere to go.

As he again opened his mouth to cry out, one of the tendrils from the pipe shot forward into his mouth, smothering him and stifling his screams.

As consciousness faded, Grant became aware of the other tendrils wrapping themselves around him, pulling him upwards. Then everything went black.

He was floating.

No, that wasn't the right word. To float you must have something *to* float.

He had nothing, yet he had everything.

He felt nothing, yet he knew all.

He was nowhere, yet he was everywhere.

He was the air, the water, the plants, the trees.

He was the tendrils that had smothered him, he was the building that had let them in.

The rush of information was too much, he couldn't take it all in.

Focus.

The voice was faint, hard to distinguish from everything that hit him like white noise.

Focus.

'I can't!' He shouted, though he knew he had no mouth.

You need a focus.

'I can't take it all at once! Help me!'

You need a being.

'What's going on? Tell me!'

You will have the answers.

'I want my life back!'

It is not yours to return to.

'Take me back!'

New life.

'No!'

New life. I will protect you.

'Who are you?'

Night Watcher. I will protect you.

Peri was not having much fun.

Despite the spectacular exterior, most of the rooms in the library were dry, stuffy, academic studies, filled with dry, stuffy, academic types. It was as if some stultifying force lived inside the place, reducing it to a catalogue of itself, a desiccated husk where there should have been life and beauty. She had spent some time in the botanical section, but the collection was so vast that references to Earth plant life were hard to find. She had considered asking one of the Cataloguers, but decided that she wasn't *that* bothered.

What she *had* noticed, with some puzzlement, was that there seemed to be no reference in the entire department to the plant life of Kar-Charrat itself. Perhaps, she reflected, this planet wanted a section all of its own.

So Peri had taken to wandering the corridors at random to see what she could find. Which had not been much.

The first thing to strike Peri as odd was encountering a locked door. As the rest of the complex had been open to her, Peri's curiosity was piqued, and she found one of the Cataloguers to ask why that room was out of bounds.

The Cataloguer, a man by the name of Prink, was as puzzled as she, confessing that he had no idea why that room should be locked. He gave her a key for the door, as, he pointed out, she had VIP status while visiting the library.

Thanking Prink, Peri returned to the room and inserted the electronic key, the door sliding open with a 'shhtick'.

Peri screamed.

In the cosmology reference section, the Doctor and Elgin had completed their search of all references to the legend of Vipod Mor, the man, and *Vipod Mor*, the vessel, and were currently poring over several volumes of the history of Setna Streen.

'One thing I don't understand,' said Elgin, looking up from his current book, 'is why they called the ship *Vipod Mor* in the first place.'

'The way things are going lately, I'd wager it was supposed to be a warning to anyone foolish enough to try to meddle with his destiny -- i.e. me!' The Doctor slammed his book shut in disgust.

'The accumulated knowledge of every civilised planet in the Universe, and I still can't find the answers I'm looking for.'

'Perhaps there are no answers,' suggested Elgin, folding his upper pair of arms. 'Perhaps you know all there is to know. At least, all you *need* to know.'

The Doctor sighed. 'Perhaps you're right, Elgin. I'm probably being too hard on myself. Even a genius can be wrong sometimes.'

Elgin chuckled. 'That's the spirit. The life you lead, you need more arms than I have to juggle all of your responsibilities!' He passed the Doctor three volumes on the subject.

'Perhaps I should learn the techniques,' the Doctor grinned, looking at the covers, 'though the lack of arms may put me at a disadvantage.'

'I'm sorry we couldn't help you, Doctor. Perhaps... ah, here's Thrank with some more books to be catalogued.'

The Doctor turned to greet the newcomer, offering his hand in

greeting. 'Nice to meet you, Cataloguer Thrank.'

But the man ignored the proffered limb, placed the books he was carrying on the table in front of Elgin, bowed slightly, and left the room.

'Doesn't say a lot, does he?' Observed the Doctor.

'Which makes him the perfect library assistant, Doctor. At least he doesn't prattle on incessantly like that Cataloguer Prink. Hardly get a word in edgeways.'

Elgin realised that the Doctor wasn't listening, engrossed as he was in one of the books that Thrank had brought into the room.

'You say these are new books, just arrived?' The Doctor asked.

'That's right. Our researchers across the galaxies send us copies of all reference works published for immediate addition to our library. Why do you ask?'

'It's just that this particular book looks rather old to be a new publication,' the Doctor replied, blowing the dust from the open pages.

'Occasionally our researchers come across an ancient text, having lain unread for centuries in forgotten ruins. They are my favourites. What is this one about?'

'Intriguing, and highly improbable,' the Doctor muttered as his eyes scanned the pages. 'For a planet to have exactly the same mass, angle of...'

'Doctor!' The Time Lord was interrupted by the flustered arrival of Peri. Her eyes were red, and it was obvious she had been crying.

'Peri, whatever is the matter?'

'They're dead! And I can't find Grant!'

'Wait, slow down. Who is dead?' The Doctor's face darkened.

'The librarian... Cataloguer... or whatever you call them, and another man - his face was burnt. It was horrible.' Peri was sobbing again. 'I've been looking for Grant...'

The Doctor rested an arm on Peri's shoulder, and she buried her head in the folds of his coat.

'It's all right. We'll find Grant later. But we need you to show us where you found the bodies. Can you do that?'

Peri looked up, sniffed her tears away and nodded. 'It's just down the corridor. I'll show you.'

The Doctor and Elgin stood in the Cataloguer's office, while Peri stayed at the doorway. She had no wish to see the bodies again.

The Doctor was examining the slashed, ribboned body of the Cataloguer.

'This is the man we just saw, Thrank wasn't it?' The Doctor looked at Elgin, who nodded his confirmation.

'He must have been killed just after he left us,' the librarian pointed out.

The Doctor shook his head. 'The body is already starting to get cold. He's not been dead long, but certainly more than a couple of minutes.

'Then how...' Elgin shook his head.

But the Doctor had already turned his attention to the other body, its face a charred mess, the ribcage pulled open, empty.

'This man was a Time Lord!' The Doctor said, aghast.

'How can you tell?' Elgin asked.

'Two heart cavities,' the Doctor pointed to the holes left by the missing organs, 'and those robes, that collar. Even with his face undistinguishable, I can't shake the feeling that I recognise him. Someone I've met recently...'

'Doctor,' Peri called from the doorway, 'if there's a killer about, don't you think we should find Grant?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Elgin, I suggest you warn your people that we have a most unwelcome visitor in the library.'

'So where did you last see him?'

The Doctor and Peri were searching the facility, concentrating on the area surrounding the reference section, reasoning that Grant couldn't have gotten very far away in the time since Peri had last seen him.

'Outside the reference section, where you left us. He didn't hang around very long, said he was going to look at the display of alien artefacts.'

The Doctor stopped abruptly.

'He said *what*?'

Peri looked worried, wondering what she had said. 'What's wrong with that?'

'The man we know as Shellingbourne Grant, though I doubt that's his real name, is a thief of the highest order. I should never have brought him here - the temptation must have been too great!'

The Doctor consulted his guidebook. 'We're not too far away. Quickly!'

Peri ran to keep up with his rapid stride.

'We're too late.'

The Doctor and Peri stood at the entrance to the artefact exhibition. The room was a mess - cabinets had been smashed, their contents spilled onto the floor, many broken. The roof was smashed too, several holes letting in the daylight and affording a view of the jungle that surrounded them.

Glass crunched underfoot as the Doctor made his way into the room, gazing around in dismay. He picked up an artefact that had spilled from its cabinet.

'I should have dropped him off somewhere before we came here,' the Doctor said angrily. 'This is my fault.'

'You weren't to know, Doctor. I trusted him too.'

'Two people are dead!'

'You think Grant killed them?' Peri couldn't believe that, even now.

'Who else? Right know he's our only candidate,' the Doctor replied. But he didn't look convinced.

'So where is he now?' Peri asked.

'I think I may have the answer to that one,' replied Elgin, who had arrived, unnoticed, at the entrance to the room. 'An escape shuttle is missing from the landing bays.'

'An open and shut case, it seems,' the Doctor muttered. 'Elgin, I'm so sorry. I should never have brought him here.'

'I think you had better leave, Doctor,' the librarian said sadly.

The Doctor nodded, and handed the artefact to Elgin. 'I think, perhaps, you're right.'

The Doctor had promised Elgin that he would have a word with the Time Lords about installing a temporal defence grid around the library, to avoid this sort of thing happening again. Then he and Peri had made

a hasty retreat, leaving the Cataloguers to salvage what they could from the destroyed artefacts and bury the dead.

It was not until they were already making their way back to the TARDIS that the Doctor noticed that he still had some of the books from the reference section.

'*Three* volumes on juggling for Alpha-Centurians? Why do they need so many?' Peri asked.

'Well, they do have a lot of arms,' the Doctor grinned. 'Even more than Elgin.'

But despite the Doctor's apparently jovial air, Peri could tell that he was still troubled.

'You don't think it was Grant, do you?'

'Hmm?' the Doctor seemed distracted, but eventually focused on Peri's question. 'No. No, I don't. The man was many things, and a thief was certainly one of them, but I don't think he's a murderer. You saw how that Time Lord had died. I'll guess I'll never know who he was, but I can only guess that he was here to warn me about something. But whatever it was that killed him, it certainly wasn't Grant.'

'Then we can only hope that it *was* Grant who stole the escape shuttle. To get away from whatever killed those men?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I can't put my finger on it, Peri, but I think that I've missed something very important here today.'

'You need a holiday, Doctor,' insisted Peri, 'somewhere peaceful.'

'As it happens, I think I've found just the place. A fascinating little place with the same mass, angle of tilt and period of rotation as Earth, but with one important benefit.'

'And what's that?'

'No humans!' the Doctor grinned.

As the Doctor and Peri made their way back to the TARDIS it began to rain.

As the warm drops of water fell onto the jungle they awakened the plants, spreading new knowledge across their leaves, soaking down to their roots.

The plants were old, as old as the planet. At least, most of them were.

A new, young plant sat beside the lake at the foot of the waterfall, feeling, for the first time, the sensation of the sun and the soft rain on its leaves: an irregular, itchy warmth. Then, gradually, the cold, crystal feel of the stony soil around its roots.

The plant feels, for the first time, the knowledge pass through it, the accumulation of information from everything on this planet coursing through its veins.

It has the *answers*.

In his black skull-ship, the man of evil smiled. The bait had taken, the trap sprung. It was now only a matter of time. The man chuckled at the irony.

Bernice felt the sun's heat on her face, on the backs of her hands where they rested on the stone. There was a slight, warm wind blowing - it smelled of something she couldn't place, some Earthborn spice, turmeric or coriander perhaps. She listened for a moment, until she could hear the slight pulse of the waves on the shore of the lake.

Without opening her eyes, she said, 'This is a perfect place.'

'The concordance of spaces moulding the hill-line,' agreed her host.

Her own voice had seemed to shatter the calm, Bernice thought, even though she'd spoken quietly. But the bubbling, chiming voice of her native host was part of the landscape. It was true that she hadn't understood anything that Night Watcher had said to her all day: but she'd greatly enjoyed the conversation.

She opened her eyes, looked again at the silent, cherry coloured lake, the huge ruby sun, the tangerine sky. The black trees leaning over the lake, each with their own phosphorescent fruit, blue, green, violet - exotic colours on this red-sun world.

She turned to her host, whose one huge eye seemed too big to fit in its oval head. The tiny spot of the pupil moved through the golden-brown swirls of the iris, like a storm through a planetary atmosphere; and came to rest facing her.

Bernice smiled.

'Night Watcher, when you see the stars at night, do you wonder what's out there? Not the stars and gasses and planets and things -

the people. What they're like? What shape they are? What they do?'

A brown membrane slid across Night Watcher's eye, left to right: for an instant Bernice was looking at a featureless ovoid. Then the eye opened again.

'The discordance of points moulding the hill-line,' replied Night Watcher, the voice chiming like a bell on the word 'points'. 'The strangeness of concordance in discord.'

Bernice smiled again. She gestured at the dull blue cuboid of the TARDIS, which (oddly enough) seemed very much in place on the low shore of the lake.

'You don't mind having visitors, then?'

Night Watcher appeared to consider for a moment.

'Distance, distance; the distance which connects all things.'

A three-fingered hand moved to grip Bernice's arm: a firm, velvet touch.

'We are grateful.'

Bernice frowned. It was the first thing she'd heard Night Watcher say all afternoon that made any sense, and she wasn't sure why her host had said it.

'Yes, I suppose it must get rather boring here,' she said at last, though she was certain that wasn't what the little alien meant.

She caught a movement at the edge of her vision: looking up, she saw a tiny figure by the lakeside, in a cream linen suit and limp fedora hat, waving an umbrella in the air.

When he saw Bernice looking, the Doctor began beckoning her, as he did this with the arm holding the umbrella, the end result was a rather curious movement, but the intent was unmistakable.

'Oh-oh,' said Bernice. 'I'm afraid I'm wanted.'

But Night Watcher held on to her arm for a moment.

'Do not be afraid.'

Bernice turned and crouched down so that her face was level with the huge eye.

'What am I meant to be afraid of?' she asked carefully.

'Good. That is better,' said the alien, letting her go. Then the membrane slid over the eye again, and this time it stayed there.

Bernice muttered to herself, 'Life is full of little misunderstandings.'

She turned round to see what the Doctor was up to.

He was making huge scooping gestures with both arms, as if requesting an aircraft to land. Bernice sighed. He'd better have a good explanation for this, she thought. She set off at a trot down the path to the lake.

By the time she got to the TARDIS the Doctor was frantic.

'*Quickly*!' he said, waving his umbrella towards the TARDIS door, which was open. 'Get in! Now!'

'Hold on, Doctor. I'd like the answers to some questions first. One, where -'

'Planetary orbit, about two thousand years ago. To prevent a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions.'

Bernice, who hadn't really been expecting any sensible answers anyway, allowed herself a small grin, then turned and looked for one last time at the cherry-coloured lake, the black trees with their lanterns, the lemon-coloured sky. She waved at Night Watcher.

'Oh, well,' she said. 'Tar-ra, I suppose.' She stepped into the TARDIS.

Behind her, Night Watcher died, quietly. His long wait was over.

Oblivion Lurks Near the Coffee Machine

Sietel Singh Gill

'Good grief, those figures really do look very nice!'

Tabitha Hattersley, iron-fisted gorgon of the second level management hierarchy, turned to cottage cheese at the sight of the numbers, as Janelle knew she would. Janelle swaggered. Success fit her like corsetry. Snug, perhaps a little asphyxiating, but hedonistically so. Before her compatriots, before Tabitha, to feel it around her, making her a vertebrate once more - an unbelievable feeling.

'What's your new assistant's name Janelle?' Tabitha leaned forward giving her spectacles a hand in overcoming her myopia, it seemed.

'Romanadvoratrelundar,' came the reply from Janelle's right. Miss Chestnut-haired thaumaturgist was as sickeningly earnest as ever, but right now Janelle was so pleased with her she could have kissed her. But not in front of Tabitha, as that would have contravened Regulation 24 in the Triyehard Pharmaceuticals Code of Conduct, the section on public displays of affection between employees of the company.

Tabitha pressed her hands together. 'Is that a Russian name?'

'Gallifreyan actually.' All right Romana, thought Janelle, you put the 'eh!' back into a-ristocratic, but let's not get pedantic. 'Oh, right. Excuse my ignorance - I haven't been keeping up with all the new places since the USSR broke up.' She looked down at her notes, muttered, then fixed Janelle in the adoring gaze Janelle had always coveted. 'Hang onto her Janelle, she's quite the clever girl.'

Janelle smiled. She and Romana were going all the way to the top.

Janelle noted that Romana was holding her Employee of the Month certificate with far less than the quota of reverence it should be afforded. She was doing her whole casual aloofness thing again, a personal style that might work with the blokes, but was eventually going to drive her into a really catty gesture, such as 'accidentally'

spilling soft drink down Romana's pin-striped suit.

'You want to get that into some sort of display case,' she advised. 'That's a ticket to heaven and a half!'

'I'll have to put it next to my Triple First notification in my room.' Oh God, she's not one of them, thought Janelle. Private school girls. Bet she's got a couple of hundred badminton trophies. And a water polo one. Bet she's cellulite-free in a swimsuit too.

'These employees that have gone missing. Do you think they were all enemies of Tabitha?' Romana walked around the room, mind probably spinning into action like a poker machine, searching all combinations for a winning sequence. One of these methodical thinkers, thought Janelle. Cubicle philosophers.

'Romana, have you not yet gleaned that EVERYONE is an enemy of Tabitha? She is the second rung of the hierarchy. What she spits becomes our rain. If making her disappear was legal she'd have ceased to exist the minute she got the job. In fact, if that was the case, nobody would hold the position for more than seconds.' Janelle scratched her head. 'You really are obsessed with these missing employees! I mean come on Romana, urban myth is one thing and I mean, it's sort of fun having this cloud of mystery over the place, but you've just 'got an Employee of the Month award and you haven't even been here a week!'

'Hardly a remarkable feat.'

This whole placid arrogance was getting on her nerves just a tad.

'Now, we've got Tabitha's attention, we've impressed her and the Board. Question is, how do we now cut her out of the equation?' Janelle started tapping her lip furiously, as if she might jumpstart it, and the lip's resultant kinesis would then spread to her brain somehow. Nervous energy, an unpredictable force.

'Perhaps Tabitha's behind the disappearances?'

Oh give it a rest! thought Janelle. Still, Romana continued. 'Were the missing employees in a similar position to you, on the way up in the company?'

'Romana, Gus the janitor with polio in his left leg and a penchant for inhaling anything the colour green was one of the first to go missing.

The only direction he was going in this company was towards becoming the world's first sentient slab of gangrene.' Janelle was getting edgy, twirling her hair in the way her mother used to hate. 'Focus Romana. Don't think of the people who aren't here, think of yourself!'

Romana halted and looked at Janelle, a curious kink in her eyebrows. Then she worked her space cadet magic yet again. 'How do you know about sentient gangrene? They don't apparently assimilate into your society until 3005.'

Janelle liked Romana. She did. But at that moment, she also liked the thought of skinning furry animals.

As Lydia walked to the coffee room, she thought about the implications, as she had so many times, of her body being able to produce its own caffeine, about what such an internal facility would mean to her. The result was precious, like unexpected words of levity from a loved one on their deathbed. Her reverie was rudely interrupted when she tripped over, a calamity of pinstripes and foundation-plastered skin. She saw what had humbled her: a crudely knitted scarf, languishing on the blue carpet. Seven colours looked at her quizzically.

'Terribly sorry about that. Didn't you see the signs?'

She looked up through her lime-green contact lenses. A janitor-like figure, clearly, stood before her. She struck him as one of those men whose calling was mundane. A man who did not know the correct time to dress as he did, but decided to instil himself with a sense of pride by choosing his own, perversely unique dress whenever it suited him. One small source of joy, identity. Scarves, hats, coats with a carpet's texture, all must be the ingredients to this man's happiness in no small way. His features gave it all away - insanity, under the care of friendliness.

'You haven't hurt yourself have you?' he said, offering a hand to her.

'What do you think you're doing?' she said.

The man spread his arms out, indicated the corridor, the way it widened and formed a diamond as it became the Coffee Cul-de-sac. She turned to see the gaudy signs, the orange imploring her: I warned you but you just ignored me, didn't you? It dawned on her who the man

was.

'Oh good grief, you're the clown they've got checking for the missing staff haven't you?'

He smiled, embracing this role. 'Well, it's not a dirty job, but I still said I'd do it. You see, I haven't met these people, but I'm so very keen to.'

Lydia clutched her head and chuckled in that way people do when they see a man in a hospital bed, grinning as if he's just won a medal. Wincing and laughing all at once.

'How long have you been at this now? Five days?'

'Three actually.'

'Mmmm. Any luck?'

'No. No, but these things take time,' he said, crouched over a map on the floor. Lydia paid it casual interest, noting the splotches on the page, like slime mould making slow progress from A to B.

'Not that I need your permission, but will you just move so that I can get my hourly fix?'

'I'm afraid not. That could prove to be terribly dangerous and I know we've just met but I'm starting to like you and I don't want you to disappear.'

She rolled her eyes and snorted simultaneously, a habit she was trying to get out of. Her boyfriend Sash said there was a time and a place for concurrent eye-rolling and snorting and it lost some of its effect when she repeated it fifty-odd times a day.

'What precisely about this corridor is so malevolent that you won't let me near the coffee machine?'

'Aha a dangerous question,' he said, turning to the cul-de-sac, assessing from a distance the good and evil in the coffee mugs on the laminated bench, with their messages screaming at him. SURROUNDED BY IDIOTS. WORLD'S BEST ORGANISER. IF THE FUTON'S ROCKING, YOUR BACK WILL HURT. 'How good is your knowledge of spatial viruses?' he posed.

'Well I've always aspired to get my Masters in it but I guess I'll have to stick to whatever I gleaned from the back of this morning's muesli packet.'

'I wouldn't be so flippant if I was you, we're looking at one of the

most destructive forces in this part of the galaxy.'

'Even more destructive than restless kittens?' she said, eyes so exaggeratedly large she imagined they were reaching Mickey Mouse proportions.

'Well, let's not be overly ostentatious, but a destructive force nonetheless. Here, hold this.' The funny man passed her an instrument that resembled a fat cockroach impaled on a Nintendo Gameboy. He then started to walk slowly, that hybrid tiptoe-tai-chi action people make when trying to walk carefully.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to try something.'

'What?'

'Spatial viruses are like computer viruses, but they work on spatial arrangements. A sort of insidious feng shui. If you have furniture in a certain arrangement, the virus can take effect, start unzipping electrons and all of a sudden atoms unravel from one another, covalent bonds break. Poof.' He stopped.

'Poof?' She had to ask.

'Everything just disappears. Collection of atoms and sub-atomic particles in the air.'

'Rubbish!'

'It's true. You might have seen it manifest in your home. Change the sofa around in relation to the television and all of a sudden you can't find your socks.'

'Or the remote... I've heard of this.' She couldn't remember where though. It was a journal, that's for sure. Something at the hairdressers. Yes, something reputable.

The funny man was now reaching for the coffee decanter. He seemed to be lining it up with the tap of the sink, and the mugs. SURROUNDED was closest to him, slightly to the left of WORLD'S BEST and in front of FUTON by centimetres. He laboriously shifted them in relation to each other, like a man trying to recreate a constellation with crockery.

Something occurred to Lydia, as the man's words reverberated in her head, trying to get out. 'Is there like a virus checker for this sort of thing?'

The man didn't turn around. 'For what?'

'You know, like for checking your emails for viruses. A spatial virus checker.' Lydia didn't really know what she was talking about, but as her mother had told her, sounding confident was the key to everything.

'Well, I'm sure if you worked out the right algorithms, it's possible.'

Lydia suddenly felt as if her throat was agoraphobic, and was thus trying to assemble the foetal position. Excitement was setting in like tetanus - look how a trip to get coffee had taken such an interesting turn! 'How do we know if we've stopped the virus?'

'Well, if we've negated its site of action, then we can throw anything there, and it won't disappear.'

Lydia was way ahead of him. She was undoing one of her butterfly hairclips. She knew that if she threw it in the cul-de-sac, in the place the man had been holding his meter, and the clip survived, it would mean she could get her coffee. If the clip disappeared, well, then, it disappeared, but that meant that he was right, and if she stuck with him till he solved the problem, she could feasibly find a ticket out of the meretricious hell that is the secretary pools.

'...but wait until I'm finish-'

She lobbed the clip into the middle of the cul-de-sac, like a lifeline out of a shaft.

It plonked on the ground and didn't even pretend to disappear.

'Aah. Now why did you do that?'

She looked up. 'To test for the virus!'

'You see, you... you see, I hadn't finished rearranging the furniture. I had a specific arrangement I wanted them in to neutralise the virus completely...' The man's fingers were locked in a battle with Rubik's imaginary cat's cradle.

'Well, it seems to have worked. Either that or you're mad and all of this is... rubbish!'

'...but I haven't set up that sequence. And you've just changed the arrangement by adding your hairclip.'

She was unhooking another hairclip, preparing to launch it into the sea of carpet, as she said, 'So we'll test it again.'

As it landed just centimetres from the other hairclip like a bowl almost kissing the jack, the funny man winced. 'Every time you throw a

new object in there it further complicates the mathematical function I'm trying to compute and the virus gets more and more elaborate and dangerous.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

Lydia noticed something, impairing her vision, like stalactites, hassling her cornea. 'My fringe is getting into my eyes now!'

'Well, that'll teach you for throwing butterflies into a disaster zone.'

Lydia was a little alarmed now. She hadn't stuck her almighty foot in it again had she? No, she thought, mustn't think like that Lyd. Slight complication, but not quite a stuff-up yet.

As her body broke into a gentle tremor, sweat escaping her skin like investors fleeing from a no-hope stock, she looked through the haze of blonde over her eyes at the stranger. He was bobbing up and down, crouched one minute, standing the next, in some form of staccato calisthenics. What was he doing? The entire routine looked like a shaman's slant on modern dance. She said as much to him.

The look of worry and concern, neatly portrayed by his disturbed features, spoke volumes of how seriously he was taking this feng shui stuff, and she felt insecure as a result. Like when she was cornered by that Mormon, pressed into that searching question: How bright is the light of God? In that moment with the Mormon, her sarcasm had been obliterated by his graveness; she was always being undone by the sombre tone of voice.

'How many people here have sugar in their tea or coffee?' he asked, flicking a quick glance at the sugar bowl, and the tea spoons, which may well have been taunting him from their ivory skyhooks above the sink.

'Oh, er, hard to say...'

'Rough figure.'

'Ummm, about half the people. We have a lot of fat employees here, and let's face it, they've lost all self-respect.' Especially that Janelle - she was putting on so much weight they'd be giving her a group discount at Marks and Sparks soon.

The man put his hand to his chin. His heavy voice pierced the silence and, like a nubile village maiden falling into a vampire's arms, her

scepticism succumbed.

'Perhaps it's not just the decanter and the mugs. Perhaps it's the arrangement of the spoons as well.'

Janelle looked over at the teaspoons and a chill hack-sawed through her spine. She had never suspected the spoons of murder.

Janelle toasted Romana. She had to. This girl was a gem, a real tullamarine in the ring of her career.

'Can you believe it. Can you believe it! I still can't. I still can't believe it.'

'Do you realise, if you keep telling yourself that, you'll bring on a sort of auto-paramnesia, where you can't discern fact from fiction.'

Oh, there she went again. Didn't matter this time though, did it? 'Hormone replacement therapy in a sherbet stick. Brilliant, honestly. Can I be honest with you?'

'Yes.'

'I thought she was going to laugh at you. I thought you were gone.'

'I realise this isn't probably what you mean at all Janelle, but as it's really starting to bother me, I have to ask.'

'Yes?'

'When you thought I was gone, did you mean, you thought she was going to terminate my employment, or did you mean, you had some sort of premonition that I was about to disappear?'

Janelle bit her lip and allowed the smooth metallic taste of haeme to mix in with the tang of the cheesecake. Conversation really was going to be futile.

'Doctor?'

'Romana, what have you found out?' The Doctor didn't turn to face her. Instead he stared through the monocle in his left eye at the gadget in his hand, which struck Romana as rather like a cockroach impaled on a Gallifreyan compass. Next to him crouched that girl who seemed to have nothing better to do, with the Doctor's scarf tied around her head like a harlequin's turban.

'Well, as far as I can tell, there was nothing remarkable about any of the employees that went missing, apart from the fact that they were

all getting coffee. There doesn't appear to be any motive for their disappearance.' She watched the girl, in silent vigilance over the cul-de-sac, like a senile human security guard she had once met, who was intent on guarding and defending his false teeth.

'Anything fishy going on in the company?' he said, eyes fixed on the device as if trying to psychically assault it.

'Well, the managers are trying to get the workers, and the secretaries are probably going to revolt.'

'Aah yes, the age-old struggle against oppression. Hold this.' He passed the device to her.

'What should I do Doctor?' Romana was always reluctant to resign herself into asking the Doctor for advice, but as she had once learnt from an experience elsewhere on Earth, it was sometimes the most rational thing for the parent to seek sagacity from the child.

'I would say have a cup of tea, but there's every chance you'll disappear into oblivion. Undone on a quest for a cup of Darjeeling.' He looked up and added: 'Terrible way to go.'

Romana was tired of all of this. The corporate hierarchy, Janelle's constant philosophising, the pointing out the obvious and being heralded as some sort of saviour - it was like Gallifrey run by humans. 'Do you want a hand at all?'

'Romana, this process of trial and error will take time. I don't need you running gung-ho into it and making a mess of things, especially as you're doing such an excellent job.' He tapped his nose again, that conspiratorial yet meaningless gesture that seemed to be designed to indicate an intimate understanding between them, but just always ended up lightly irritating her.

'But I haven't achieved anyth-' He was ignoring her, stirring her. Romana smiled, ever so slightly. 'Well actually Doctor, I'm afraid you're going to have to hurry up.'

'Why?'

'Because I've been put in charge of human resources and you're costing the company too much.'

'Really,' he looked up at her, monocle falling out of place. 'I didn't know I was being paid?'

'You're not earning much.'

'Why not? You're supposed to defend my rights as a worker!'

'It's been argued that you're not really doing work.'

'Who- Hang on, whose side are you on anyway?'

'Well, you told me to infiltrate the company and act as one of them.' She had to smile. It was the right thing to do.

'Pah! Do you want to try and solve this immensely complex problem?'

'It's not a spatial virus you know, it has to be something else.'

'Like what? It's not a T-Mat, hidden door or invisible miasma creature. It has to be this, and these readings don't lie.'

'Are you sure that's not the perfume toxicity meter we picked up from Calenus VII?'

'Perfectly sure.'

'I'm not so sure. Anyway, you're wasting your time with that.'

'Doctor,' the young girl stood up and stared at him, inspiration in her eyes, banging on the inside of her cornea like a prison inmate trying to smash his way out of his cell. Romana wondered where that image had come from, just as the girl said: 'If we move the hairclips into the shape of a V, will that help?'

Romana chimed at the same time as the Doctor: 'No.'

'You're setting me up for the fall aren't you Romana eh? You little Commie you.' Janelle leered at Little Miss Pretty-Boots, feeling like a particularly menacing mongoose leering over, well, a less menacing mongoose. A scared, docile mongoose who all the other mongooses love to the point where she became the stalking mongoose of the management mongooses, to rat out everyone else.

'You're just such a little princess, with your hair and your eye shadow and your, your, “ooh I'm a Time Lady, look at me, I'm such a ladyyyy.” Well you don't fool me. You didn't fool me from Day One.'

'You're really acting quite irrationally Janelle.'

'I created you... you... you Shetland pony you!'

'Why don't we just sit down and get to the bottom of this?'

Janelle wasn't going to fall for that old one, the calm voice of reason. People didn't sack you with bile in their throats anymore. She was again being assaulted with visions of horrible things happening to

guinea pigs. No, the best defence was hormone-driven aggression.

'If I go down, I'm grabbing your hair and never letting go. Your head will be a bleeding mass of torn out roots before I leave this company.'

'That memo I sent you was to tell you that you've just taken over the regional manager position for the London area. Half the upper management corp has disappeared. I didn't want it to occur this way, as I am very aware of the danger this now places you in, but we're that much closer to the top, and hopefully the reason for the disappearances.'

Romana's words sounded out in slow-motion. Janelle felt her hormones stop, take stock, and then fall into the sweet sleep of relief. She knew she was meant to feel regret now, for grilling Romana, but she'd that let that emotion take its time making itself known.

'Oh, er, sorry. Sorry about that. Er, do you want to go... shopping again. Can I buy you an ice cream? Rocky Road perhaps?' Rocky Road, thought Janelle. Great diplomats always made full use of Rocky Road.

'Fat, bloated moggie,' said Lydia, watching Eric Keller's fat cat slip past her and the Doctor's mock barricade into the cul-de-sac. She was depressed now. She'd wasted four days of her life here, with this loony, trying yet again to clutch onto another false way out of secretarial mediocrity. In front of her lay a magpie's nest of jelly babies, rolls of sticky tape and about eleven butterfly clips, looking like the victims of an insidious insecticide.

The Doctor was next to her, now with a mini-whiteboard, doing a portrait of the scene like a still-life arts student. Whatever torpor had seized control of her body, was also working its voodoo on him.

God, she thought. That weekend with Sash's parents wasn't so bad after all.

She had to direct the anger that was building up in her at something. Cats. She *hated* cats. Especially cats let into the building because their owners were in the CEO's good books. Where was that cat? She could see it in her peripheral vision, poking at the butterfly clips.

Then it disappeared.

She sprung up and took a good look at the spot, searching,

scouring. She turned to the Doctor, and he too was on his knees (clearly not as excited as she was), eyes bulging open, like a garage door half-open, jammed.

'We're back in business,' she mouthed.

Romana walked into a cobweb, the silky newly-renovated home flopping over her face. She brushed it aside. So this is why Janelle was smiling evilly upstairs, thought Romana, as she took in her surroundings. Dank, damp, dark, dingy, dreadful. A room that could only be described with the letter 'd'. Romana considered whether the letter itself had come about from humanity's need to describe such places.

Romana reflected on the past two weeks, on how she had allowed herself to be carried by events, to stoop to the Doctor's level of ridiculousness. One word seemed to crop up every time - loneliness. Oh sure there was always the Doctor and K9, but the Doctor mixed the cerebral with the lunatic, and K9 reminded her of the most prosaic aspects of herself. She didn't want to admit it to herself, but this reaching out and being amongst humans, socialising; a guilty pleasure. However, if she wanted to be relegated to ignominious vocations such as 'Photocopying Manager' (her new mantle assigned to her by Janelle, new chairperson and president of the company board) she could have done that on Gallifrey.

So here she was, looking in the bowels of the building for reams of A4; the succourer to end the paper famine. Two weeks and here she was. Her life hadn't been threatened, unless you counted Janelle's accusations, she hadn't even found out who ran the company. Was it the shareholders exercising their rights to get rid of staff they considered dead weight? Was it something else entirely? Where was this paper?

These were the questions on her mind as she walked into the cage.

'Oh Romana, thank God you've come. Thank heavens!'

Inside the cage was a rather hysteric Tabitha, grime plastered on her face, mixing with the foundation to form a strange yin-yang symbol. She seemed unharmed, but quivering.

'Tabitha, are you all right?'

'He's got us Romana. He has us all!'

'Who?' Romana asked. Light from another room jackknifed into her vision.

She slipped over to the wall and peered around the corner. A rank of television sets, about nine or so, sat on the far wall, gargling images. A blue glow filled the room, giving enough light for her to see a bald head, facing the mesmerising screens.

'So, you've found me,' came a heavy voice.

Romana walked over to the screens. On one of them she saw Janelle's office. On another, an image of the Doctor and his newfound friend, crouched, waiting for the world to implode probably.

'Are you responsible for putting her in that cage?' Romana asked.

'I'm responsible for all of it. All of it. Every one of them. So what?'

Romana registered his words. 'All of what?' Then the words gained meaning for her. 'Oh, you must be responsible for the disappearances.'

'No I'm not.'

'You're not?' Romana seemed shocked, dismayed.

'Of course I am you silly. And I bet you're glad.'

'Why would I be glad?'

'Well, the way I see it, you're about the only one there that has any work ethic. The others, they're like caustic soda. Irritating like nothing else, and they're a dime a dozen.'

'What an esoteric analogy.'

'Now listen here,' said the bald man, standing up. He had a handlebar moustache - Romana felt like reaching out and flicking it, as if it might spin around. 'I've had plenty of time to get my English nice and perfect so don't go pulling that private school girl rubbish with me.'

Romana was unfazed. 'Where are the rest of them?'

'Oh they're all there. Dungeons last for miles down here.'

Dungeons! That was it! The ultimate d-word. Romana re-focussed: 'Why did you do it?'

'Why? I've protected this building for years, since this company was a little babe. This, this, this is my sanctuary. I've kept an eye on this place, prevented fires, scared off burglars, you name it.' The man was flinging his arms around, trying to mimic some sort of propeller on a flight craft, no doubt. Romana noted that the correct word for this sort

of behaviour was 'irate'. 'And you know what thanks I get for it?'

'No?'

'They sacked me, and didn't even tell me. I mean, I'd worked the past three years without realising they hadn't been paying me!'

'How could you not realise they weren't paying you? How did you survive?'

He smiled. 'Well, er, when you have the keys to the vending machines, who needs a wok and oven, eh? That's beside the point. They didn't tell me I was fired and I took it in good faith that they were decent people, even though they irritated me to the point of teeth gnashing. In my sleep, I mean, gnashing my teeth in my sleep! Can you believe how silly that feels when my dentures are out?'

Romana admitted that she couldn't, although she thought about it first.

'They deserve everything they get,' he finished.

Romana could see that look in his eyes, the look of a zealot. 'Listen,' she said. 'There's hardly anyone left in the company anymore.'

'Yes I know, I've crippled it. Haha!'

'Did you enjoy your job?'

'Of course I enjoyed my job!' he shouted. 'I jolly well adored it.'

'Well,' Romana smiled, seeing an easy solution to the problem. If she could just work up enough charm... 'If I promote you to a managerial position, so that you could manage these people rather than imprison them, would you take it?'

He balked. 'You? You're just another powerless crony!'

'Perhaps. However, Tabitha is qualified to facilitate such a transfer and I'm sure she'd be more than happy to do that.'

'YES! YES! YOU CAN HAVE IT ALL! JUST LET ME GO!' came a panicked voice.

'What benefit would that be to me, eh?' he asked.

'Well, if you love the company, wouldn't you rather help it flourish rather than see it suffer? In a managerial position, it's the done thing to do to make life unpleasant for your underlings.'

The man stopped for a moment, sized her up. He contemplated her suggestion, Romana picturing the nerve impulses bouncing across his tiny brain, like sherbet fizzing.

'The power to terminate employment. With that I could rule the world!'

'Oh, I suppose. Just as long as you don't hurt anyone.'

He smiled at her, his glazed gaze like alpha radiation, hitting her skin and bouncing off. 'Deal,' he said. He offered a hand. Romana shook it. This connection between her and the bald man took about ten seconds too long for her to be comfortable, but she eventually managed to wrench her hand free from his overenthusiastic grip.

'Can I ask a question? How did you make them disappear?'

He giggled. 'Oh easy, Every corporate ning-nong in this place worships their cup of coffee or tea. It's always “English Breakfast” this or “Darjeeling” that. So I got all of them when they were making their cups of coffee.'

'Yes, but how?'

'Oh, there's a cleverly concealed trap-door there.' He pointed at the television monitors, which, as if collectively taken aback, changed their images. 'I just pull the lever from down here, they pop down a chute, and I stick them in a cell. You see, this company is big on its procedures. I've made sure my kidnappings have met the highest protocols.' Sarcasm, surmised Romana. 'I'm astounded your friend hasn't found it yet. Not very bright is he?' He turned to look at the Doctor, who was retying the mock turban on his new assistant's head.

'So you don't actually know anything about spatial viruses?' Romana had to be sure.

'You watch your language young lady. I've never had any virus. I've a great sense of hygiene, better than any of you posh types, no matter what you may assume from my surroundings.'

Romana smiled. So, this trip hadn't been a waste after all.

They were almost there! Six days, and they'd solve it - on the seventh one, she'd rest, and she'd enjoy it. Lydia's blood pressure had risen about 20 units or so in the time they'd spent trying to deactivate this virus. But when she reached the pinnacle, when they cracked it, well, that was just the beginning wasn't it? Once they'd established themselves, she and the Doctor, as, well, the Doctor and Lydia's Spatial Virus Solutions, they'd be on their way to the top. From here to

a website and a specially moulded lunchbox with her image on it. Perhaps a mental leap, she thought, but whimsy and fancy were lovers running hand-in-hand in a field in her mind and she was starting to idolise them as much as she had Charles and Diana.

'This should do it,' said the Doctor. He had risked his body yet again trying to debug the virus, its virulence a palpable presence in the room, like a departmental inspector to a feeble office worker. He looked ever determined. She admired his persistence, his patience, his resolve. She knew it was his brilliance that would hand them the solution, the camembert and jarlsberg on Turkish bread. But, she thought, but... what if he solved it and then, say, disappeared soon after? He was after all expendable in the long run, she surmised. She looked at his countenance as he fiddled with that gizmo of his. Nobody would miss him if he died! There were certain criteria for mourning anyone, and cosmetic considerations heavily influenced these.

He gasped, a sharp capture of air, like an asthmatic inhaling Ventolin. He looked at the sheer imbroglio (Sasha's dad's favourite word, for some reason) of knick-knacks lying on the ground, like the living room of a drunken bower bird, dragging all sorts of rubbish home from all over the countryside. (A bower bird with a particular fetish for butterfly hair clips of all shapes and colours, exactly matching Lydia's personal taste in hair clips.) He turned to her and looked down at his gizmo.

In a low voice he uttered. 'I think our virus is no longer with us.' A grin followed, far too toothy for the occasion.

Any further analysis of the appropriateness of the Doctor's smile was rudely interrupted by a figure approaching Lydia, seen in her peripheral vision. She turned in time to see Alex Tansley walk past her line-in-the-carpet and into the danger zone. She blurted out a 'noooooooooooo!'. Alex stopped before the mess of objects on the carpet and giggled to himself.

'You kids having fun or what?' he said, and turned to the sink. Lydia felt an immense sense of dread. She sort of liked Alex and didn't want to see him die at the hands of the spoons or of this virus which might still be about and maybe he'd be okay because the Doctor really had defused it yay yay yay but maybe this was false hope and Alex would

disappear into nothingness and...

Hadn't Alex already disappeared?

Lydia jumped to her feet. 'What are you doing back Alex?' She felt something was very wrong, could feel it all the way into her marrow. Her hairs tried to hackle as a cat's did, but she just wasn't feline enough.

The Doctor added: 'I'd stay very still. I'm not 100% sure that the virus has been destroyed. I wouldn't want you to disappear.'

'What, through the trap door?' Alex gave them both a reassuring, if slightly knee-jellying, smile. 'Don't worry, it's been deactivated. Romana's taken care of that.'

Lydia's heart skipped a beat, and then started skipping beats with the dedication of an alcoholic to a spiral of self-destruction. 'What do you mean?'

'Haven't you heard Lyd? We were all trapped in these lousy little holding cells in the basement by some nutter security guard. Romana sprung us all loose. You know Romana, the good sort that was hanging around Janelle.'

Lydia gritted her teeth. Yes. Romana. The Doctor's friend.

The Doctor walked forward tentatively, looking confused. Or was he faking it? 'I'm sorry, you mentioned a trap door earlier.'

Alex pointed to the floor. 'Yeah, there's a trap door here, hidden really well by the carpet. I can't really see it for looking.'

'So there's no spatial virus?' Lydia felt she was soon going to break into a rough impersonation of Krakatoa, losing its dormancy.

Alex laughed. 'We were watching you on the monitors downstairs when Romana sprung us loose. You two were pretty funny.'

Lydia looked through rage-curtained eyes at the Doctor. The con man was feigning shock. What an insidious liar. What a fraudulent pretender. She would kill him. She would murder him. 'You are a dead man Doctor,' she uttered. She grabbed the final butterfly clip from her hair and held it in her hand, positioned it so the sharp aperture at the head of the clip could be used as a knife, for impaling in whatever small way the fools of this world she did not have to suffer gladly.

She lunged at the Doctor with it, an angry swing. He ducked out of the way, polluting the silence with words such as 'now let's be

reasonable' and 'calm down'. He made a break for it, away from the coffee machine Searing Alex with a daggers glance, she set off in pursuit of the Doctor.

'Over here Doctor!' yelled a familiar evil voice. It was the con lass, Romana. She was standing in the doorway of a police box positioned in the Floor 13 elevator foyer. So, these two were going all out to take the mickey out of her, weren't they? They'd brought props! Lydia would make sure that she pushed the butterfly clip in so hard she'd pop each of their aortas.

The Doctor dashed into the prop and closed the door. They were hiding from her in a prop! Hah, she thought. She'd get them now. She hurled all her bile at the blue doors, and kept venting her anger, her grief, at the futility of her existence as a secretary and how she hated them for teasing her with a way out of it and how they took advantage of her whimsy and she fell to the ground when the police box disappeared and was left to her tears.

And somewhere on level one, Janelle cried. And cried. Paused, thought of Romana, felt regretful, and cried some more. She again felt miserable about her demotion in the company for 'vulture-like behaviour in a time of turmoil' which apparently, needed 'bald eagle determination and leadership,' in the words of Tabitha. She felt wretched that her new boss was a horrid, horrible old former security guard who enjoyed making her life a living hell. More importantly, she cried because she too had seen a way out of her existence, had had it follow her around like an irritating younger sister, and had cheated it, and thus herself, out of a place amongst the upper most echelons of management. Not even the most ecstatic dreams of rocky road and skinned animals would salve her agony.

And somewhere, on Floor 9 of Triyehard Pharmaceuticals' Main Offices (the other office floor), Catherine Bergoyne was also deeply disappointed, crushed, to the point of tears. Catherine didn't really know Lydia, and her dealings with Janelle had been terse phone calls to palm off some job or other. Catherine had nothing to do with the coffee cul-de-sac disappearances, nor did she really pay much

attention to the fleeting kerfuffle the company had been in. She had met Romana once and hadn't really had much of an opinion about her. She had met the Doctor once as well, and had immediately had a déjà vu of a night spent with a BBC actor in a motel in Cambridge.

In short, Catherine had little reason related to the story for any sort of misery. Yet, when the police box had materialised out of nowhere and Romana had stepped out and absconded with the best foot-warmer she had ever had, the sheer shock of the loss of the finest item she had ever owned had driven her to tears. Where would she ever find a foot warmer with custom settings, a fine laser heat ray for those hard to reach cold spots and chilblains on the soles of her feet, and such a cute design as that of a little robot dog? She cried uncontrollably, understandably, for she had suffered a tragedy, one perhaps worse than Lydia or Janelle.

The office environment is full of tragedies. Oblivion, if anywhere, is near the coffee machine, but not as close as it is to the core of our lives, our routine. Sometimes all it takes is one person to change all of this, to turn our lives upside down, to show us our inequities. Sometimes it's for the best to look oblivion in the eye and stare it out. Humble ourselves, so that we reach for our goals in life with renewed vigour. That we may escape the pointlessness of corporate life and pursue meaningful goals.

That's the sort of stuff Romana talked about when she worked here. Nice girl, you know, but if I'd had lunch with her one more time I think I would have tried to drown her in my chocolate milk. Little private school tart.

Tempus Refugit

James Ambuehl & Simon Bucher-Jones

Private First Class Andrew Donnelly dropped his still smouldering cigarette unceremoniously to the hut floor and ground it out under his bootheel. He coughed nervously. Unwillingly, yet inevitably, for what seemed the thousandth time that frosty night, he turned to gaze with nervous fascination upon the object resting there beneath the floodlights.

The candle-power of the thick lenses, the beams glancing off its surface in a thousand points of light, should have warmed it, but it remained as cold as when it had been found buried in a London sub-cellar. As cold as his mate Private Holland had said it had been on the flatbed truck. *Cold enough to freeze the balls of a brass monkey*, he'd said 'Bloody big monkey,' Donnelly had quipped, imagining King Kong at the vets. After its discovery, after the military attaches had determined that it definitely wasn't an unexploded bomb left over from World War II, the call had come in to them. UNIT. The Unlucky Nutters, as the regular squaddies called them. They were the ones who were on call to deal with whatever was perceived as threats, or remnants, of alien invasions, indeed anything out of the ordinary, of the unknown, and this artefact certainly fit that bill.

Oddly, for all its size it was relatively light or they'd never have shifted it so easily. Weird thing. This blue-steel mirror: this icy opacity; this frozen ball of space-spit. It reminded him of something from one of those old *Nightshade* serials. He was only grateful it wasn't creepy shades of black and white, Christ those things had scared him as a kid.

Only another hour now to relief; Private Holland could have this back and welcome. This thing was a regular creep show, it was. It glowed faintly under the lights with an inner energy, and he imagined a dull, brain-irritating droning, like that of an undiscovered fly, washed over the room. Sometimes, he thought, there were other, more alarming sounds too, like a far off rushing wind, or a voice whispering somewhere,

which made Donnelly's stomach tighten. It seemed to do anything but remain silent and inert, this smooth 20-foot diameter oblate spheroid. It gave him the shivers and no mistake, had from the first.

He had been on duty when it had been delivered into the custody of Lethbridge-Stewart, and the Brigadier in turn had attempted to contact his mysterious scientific adviser, the one they called the Doctor. Donnelly had seen him once, shortly after he had been involved in the raid on Stangmoor Prison, sorting out that wretched bloke, the career-criminal known as the Master. The Master had escaped at the tail end the fray, of course; still, they'd won that one well enough, and his outfit had even earned themselves a three-day pass. It was on R and R that Donnelly had seen the Doctor, driving into town in that old jalopy of his. With his crimson-lined cape and unruly mop of white hair he would have looked a right clown were it not for the way he carried himself tall and proud behind the wheel. Even as pissed as the soldier had been that late afternoon, he'd had to stop and admire that bizarre figure; the Doctor had a certain something about him, he had to give him that.

Now the Doctor's assistant, Jo Grant, she Donnelly had gotten to know quite well. Indeed, they'd gone out for a night on the town now and then. He loved her bubbly personality and her quirky fashion sense. She was one-of-a-kind, was Jo Grant.

It was not any kind of sudden sound that drew the soldier's attention back to the present, but rather the cessation of such. The half-imagined humming, the whispering of the enigmatic object had ceased, and by ceasing had shown itself finally as more than imagination. Without it the hut was filled with a thick silence like the moment in Private Morris' funeral when the coffin had started to roll towards the fire, just before the crematorium tape creaked on, late with the last post. He fumbled his rifle off his shoulder with cold, nerveless fingers, suddenly wishing that his outfit wasn't so short-handed. Bloody Daleks at bloody Auderley, bloody Morris copping it like that. With men down they'd had to post sentry duty lightly this evening; he could have used a few more chaps about him then, not that he was scared, just for a spot of camaraderie. They'd said Morris' insides had been *scrambled* like...

Shaking the thought off, he took a deep breath. He began to

approach the object set beneath the array of floodlights, his footsteps moving quietly, stealthily. He had nearly gained the pen where the alien artefact rested when all flickered and went black. The floodlights had gone out!

He deliberated snapping on the small electric torch he carried on his web-belt, but the dim, cyan-blue glow of the pulsing orb seemed to give off sufficient light that he ultimately decided against it. It would only serve to give away his position anyway, if there was an intruder present - and he felt just then that indeed there was. Slowly, his pulse racing, heartbeat pounding in his ears like a triphammer, he reached out a surprisingly steady hand and unlatched the door to the pen. The chain-link door swung inwards with a slight metallic rattle, and just then he heard another sound echo it: a soft, malevolent chuckle from behind him.

He swung fluidly, and brought both rifle and clicked on torch to bear on his assailant. The dark-eyed, dark-bearded face lit in the sodium glare appeared to be that of Old Scratch himself. Yet he knew that face well. It had been plastered prominently on the face of nearly all the documents UNIT had handed out to its retinue for the last few months - the face of the enemy - the saturnine visage of the Master!

And though Donnelly had the rifle aimed directly at the sardonic figure's chest, and though he needed but tighten his finger on the trigger and end this international threat once and for all, he found to his utmost frustration that he could not do so. Those eyes - those dark orbs black as night itself - held him paralysed in their gaze.

'Oh, I see by your grimace that you recognize me. Indeed, I am the Master... and you'll do precisely as I say, won't you, Private?'

Then, for Private Andrew Donnelly, all went black.

He seemed to awaken gradually, swimming back to consciousness with a fuzziness not unlike his worst hangover yet. His head felt as if in a deep fog, and his vision was likewise muzzy. Yet he felt his limbs moving of their own volition, his body doing something his mind was not directly aware of. But what?

Then, as from a great distance, he saw, and he tried to will his arms, his hands, his fingers to cease their actions, but to no avail. His

rebellious limbs just went right on continuing to tie down the unconscious form of the Doctor to the glowing orb's hastily constructed dais of heavy packing crates, directly at the foot of the spheroid itself. Nor could he then stop himself from taking his place directly beside the figure of the Master.

'Well done, Private, all tied down nice and securely, is he?' He heard the hated fiend's voice come to him as if from underwater. 'Good. Then let's awaken our guest, shall we?'

To his horror, he felt his body move again, as rather zombie-like it shuffled over to the prone figure of the Doctor, and bending over him slapped him awake none-too-gently.

'Uh uhn... p-private, what is the meaning of this? Have you gone mad...? Oh, it's you,' he uttered, turning his head to the side. 'I should have known. What is your game this time?'

'Yes, Doctor, I'm glad to see you too. In fact, doubly so, since I shall soon be setting eyes upon you for the last time.' The voices began to become a bit clearer, yet they still seemed to Donnelly to echo as from far away.

'I've heard it all before, you know. And tell me, why do you have me staked out here like this, in front of a giant... er, that is some sort of egg, isn't it?'

'Right first time,' exclaimed the Master. 'But it isn't just any egg, Doctor. It is the egg of Kutulu, the greatest of-'

'What, Chronovores? Whom else would have their very name woven directly into the legendry of the gods. Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek and the like. But I should think you'd have learned your lesson last time. Remember what happened with Kronos, and the destruction of Atlantis?'

'Kronos was too powerful, I'll grant you that. Ah, but here I have a young Chronovore, indeed one not yet hatched, to imprint and direct as I see fit And I should find him much easier to control, I think... especially when he's well-fed.' He chuckled at this last.

'I see. And I'm guessing that the menu is... me?'

'Of course, my dear Doctor. It's good to see that the stun gas grenade I had Private Donnelly here use on you in your lab hasn't addled your senses. As you know, Chronovores feed on time itself; yet,

a young specimen may be coaxed to subsist on another form of energy... say, the artron irradiated bio-matter cells of a Time Lord.'

'I shouldn't doubt it,' said the Doctor rather resignedly. 'But tell me, how do you expect him to eat me? He's not even hatched yet, and it could take thousands of years for -'

'Actually, Doctor, he *is* ready to feed. The blue glow signals it, you know, the sac of raw time in the egg is becoming blue-shifted as it is exhausted. He is hungry now, and it may surprise you to learn that Kutulu doesn't have to be hatched in order to feed. Why, he can simply extrude a number of tendrils through the interstices of the surface of the chronal shell, to siphon off the energy he requires for sustenance. But really, Doctor, haven't you read the writings of Astrolabus on Chronovores? You know nothing of them, it seems.' He laughed mockingly again.

'Yes. Well. Look, I don't suppose I can dissuade you from going ahead with your diabolical plans, so just get on with it, man!'

'As you wish, Doctor. But I shall truly miss our little sparring matches. It seems I do have the last laugh after all, my friend. Oh, and don't expect to simply regenerate: the loss of the artron-coated bio-matter would make such a prospect very... infeasible, to say the least. Good-bye, Doctor.'

The agonizing death-screams seemed to awaken something yet more in Donnelly, as did the sight of the Doctor's body being horribly shrunken and deflated like a punctured toy balloon by that wriggling mass of tentacles at this end of the egg. Tearing his vision away from the ghastly spectacle with the greatest of efforts, he tried desperately to stretch a finger, to flex his hand. His wrist moved slowly, and he tried to block out the agonizing feeling of pins and needles. This last slowly but surely subsided, and he prepared the rest of his body to stretch slowly, stealthily, and make its move. Yet from his vantage point, his rifle was nowhere to be seen. He'd have to tackle the chortling figure of the Master without it.

'Ah, at last it is finished.' Donnelly heard a sigh escape the Master's lips. 'Kutulu has fed well, it seems, and soon he will hatch and do my bidding. But I think it is high time I dealt with you, Private, and prepared

to be well away from here before daybreak, and consequently, your UNIT's reveille arrives. My TARDIS is still on the mend after my foolish attempt to enter Cygnus X-1 without adhering to the proper precautions, but I should think Kutulu's power should be sufficient now, to carry us directly into the Vortex-'

There was more, of course, but Donnelly had tuned out the voice just then, as he proceeded to gather himself for the attack. True, he was too late to save the Doctor, but maybe, just maybe he could still avenge him in the end. He swiftly familiarised himself with all he knew of this master-criminal: his *modus operandi*, his fantastic array of weaponry. Then like a bolt from the blue he had his answer, and he dove into action, socking the over-confident villain on the jaw with a powerful left while simultaneously reaching into the man's right front pocket. Closing his hand around the small, rod-like device, Donnelly withdrew the Master's Tissue-Compression Eliminator from his tunic and pointed it at the monstrous blue egg and fired. He was rewarded by seeing the orb enveloped in a beam of light.

He thought he heard a monstrous bestial roaring, coming from the direction of the egg, which gradually decreased in volume until he could hear it no more. Then, before his astonished eyes, he saw the Doctor's lifeless, emaciated body begin to inflate, to swell up again, and he saw it move, swiftly pulling its shrunken limbs from its bonds with the sheerest of willpower before it had regained its full previous thickness. Then he felt himself spun savagely half-around, and the weapon wrenched viciously from his grasp and pointed in his direction. From the corner of his eye he saw the reconstituted Doctor forward and bowl into him, even as he felt the flash of the TCE bathe him in its lethal light.

'So you see, Brigadier, young Donnelly - Jo's beau, you know - saved my life in the end.' The Doctor paused to rub the back of his neck with a black-gloved hand. 'Well, rather, he gave my life back to me. You see, after he was hit by the rays of the Master's TCE - which, incidentally, I was able to deflect partially by shoving him away from the line of fire - Donnelly lived long enough, just, to fill me in on the events leading up to... well, my death, as a matter of fact.'

A short scream sounded from the doorway to the Brigadier's office.

Jo had just come in from an overnight trip to visit with Liz, whom she'd grown rather close to following the events of their recent adventure in St. Petersburg together. And it was obvious by the dropped packages at her feet that apart from the female bonding the trip had entailed plenty of shopping as well. But now, oblivious to the hodgepodge at her feet, she stood there pale and trembling.

'Andy is... d-dead?'

The Doctor looked at her sadly. 'Yes, Jo, I'm afraid he is. But you should be proud of him; he... he saved my life.'

'And *you* died too?' she managed to choke out between sobs.

'Er... um, yes... well,' he began sheepishly. 'As I was just telling Lethbridge-Stewart here, Jo, Private Donnelly's use of the Master's weapon on the Chronovore's egg caused the egg to compact, the remaining time stored in its “yolk” burst out causing local time to run in reverse however briefly, which had the thankful effect of re-establishing my personal timeline. I died, and yet I did not die. As the Americans say, 'I got better'. Poor Donnelly, if only he'd been a Time Lord, his body also would have been able to maintain itself after the effect passed.

The Brigadier looked more confused than ever. 'I see. And the Master?'

'I'm afraid he got away again. But I could not desert a fallen comrade on the field of battle, so to speak, could I, Brigadier?'

'No, Doctor, I suppose not. I'll see that Donnelly gets a medal dedicated in his honour. But now, Doctor, Miss Grant is quite shaken up. Why don't you escort her to her quarters, and we'll see about sorting out the Master again later.'

By the time they had reached her quarters she had stopped shaking at least. She was still crying softly.

'Oh, Doctor,' she sobbed, 'If ever a-anything should happen to you,

I-I just don't know w-what I would d-do…'

'Yes, yes, Jo, I know. I feel the same way about you.' He looked around her room rather uncomfortably, not certain exactly how to comfort the poor girl. 'But look, why don't you have a nice lie-down and when you wake up everything will be -'

'B-but it won't, w-will it? It *won't* be all right! He's *dead*!' She was fairly shouting now, but then she seemed to calm down once more. 'Poor Andy, he was s-so young. I'll miss him terribly.'

The Doctor nodded softly. 'Yes, Jo, I know how you feel. I owe him my life, remember?' Seeing her brighten somewhat then, and smile up at him, he turned to leave, then stopped and came back for a moment to stand before the softly sobbing girl.

'Jo, here.' He handed her something from his pocket. 'I think Private Donnelly - Andrew - would have liked you to have this. *I'd* like you to have it.'

Then he was gone out the door, leaving her gazing at an object resting upon her palm which looked rather like a small, oblong blue pearl, but was in reality the cool, beautiful remains of a time monster's egg.

All The Time In The World

SUSANNAH TILLER

The story so far...

Jacqueline Maguire is a UNIT soldier. She first met Samantha Jones when Sam and the Doctor helped some UNIT soldiers in mock war games. At the time, Sam is struggling to come to terms with her sexuality. Although she's obviously attracted to Maguire, she can't act on it. Six months later, Sam Jones is arrested in Sydney, Australia. When she rings up UNIT to bail her out, it's Maguire who turns up. On the way back to her flat. Maguire explains that she's on an overseas exchange. She and Sam spend the night together. In the morning, Maguire escorts Sam back to the TARDIS, trying to hide her feelings. On the spur of the moment, she accepts the Doctor's invitation to travel with them. Ultimately, Maguire wants to return to her normal life. As this story begins, she's settling back into life in Sydney, one year after she'd left it.

The morning after the housewarming, Sam and Maguire both had roaring hangovers. They slept in 'til mid afternoon and ran into each other in the bathroom, where Sam was splashing cold water on her face. Maguire crept up behind her, and grabbed Sam around the waist. 'God, what a night,' she said.

Sam grinned. 'But well worth it.' She swivelled around in Maguire's embrace, so they were facing each other. They kissed. Gently at first, then with more intensity, taking in each other's smell and taste and feeling.

Eventually, Sam broke away. 'You know I've got to go,' she said.

Maguire nodded. 'I know.'

'I'll be back as often as I can, you know that, too.'

'I know.' She sat down on the edge of the bath, and rubbed her forehead. 'Christ, my head feels like a squad of Daleks did the Macarena inside it.'

A memory from the night before surfaced. Sam caught her eye. 'The Doctor dancing,' she said, trying not to giggle.

'And the yellow dip,' Maguire grinned back. 'My god, remind me to throw that out next time we hold a party. What were we thinking?'

'So we're still "we", then?' Sam said, a little softly.

Maguire reached out, and took Sam's hands in hers. 'Sure. Unless there's a Cyberman out there somewhere with your name etched onto his chest plate?'

Sam pretended to frown. 'No, that's Steve the Dalek. He's got such a magnetic personality.'

'Piss off,' Maguire grinned.

'I'll be back, you know.'

Three months later, Maguire came home from the supermarket to find Sam sitting on her doorstep. She dropped two bags of groceries and swept Sam off her feet. 'Sam!'

'The one and the same,' Sam grinned back. Her hair was longer now, curling down below her shoulders. 'Come on, I've made you dinner.'

'Thanks. Help me get the stuff in from the car and I'll marry you!'

Sam glanced out at the pavement, where Maguire's UNIT-issue jeep was parked. 'What happened to your other car?'

'What other car? I've been driving this one since I got back.'

Sam glanced at her watch. 'Oops. It's only March. And you won't be getting the new car 'til December.'

'So I do get a new one? Fabulous. The brakes in this one are shot to pieces. Come on, let's get inside... Is that fettuccine I can smell?'

That night, they slept curled up in each other's arms. In the morning they showered and ate breakfast together, before Maguire left for work. When she got home, Sam was gone, and there was a vegetarian pizza in the oven.

On December 23rd, Maguire nearly had an accident on her way to work. The new car was taking some getting used to, and the promotion had been a bit of a shock. Sam hadn't said anything about that. Cheeky little monkey. It'd been - how long? Six months now, and not even a

postcard. UNIT had a few unsubstantiated sightings here and there, but nothing concrete. They knew why she was asking, of course, and they teased her mercilessly about it.

Maguire swore, and pressed her foot down as the car in front of her braked.

When she got to work, the receptionist was smiling. 'Morning, Jacqueline,' she said, a smile dancing up and down one corner of her mouth. 'There's a parcel waiting in your office. Special delivery.'

Must be those reports on the Caponecchia Incident. Only two weeks late, or was it three?

Instead, it was Sam, sitting on her desk, swinging her legs. 'Hi,' she said, almost shyly. 'Merry Christmas.'

Maguire picked Sam off the desk, and gently sat her in her office chair. 'Amazing what you can send through the post these days, isn't it?' she said, running her fmgers through Sam's hair. It was shorter than it had been before.

Sam nodded. 'Missed you.'

'Missed you, too.' They held each other for a long time. 'How's the Doctor?'

'Oh you know.' Sam looked up at her. 'Little green men, world domination, yadda, yadda, yadda. I got time off for good behaviour.'

'That's a first,' Maguire muttered. 'Um, do you want to go for a herbal tea, or something?'

'Thought you'd never ask.' She grabbed Maguire's keys from the desk. 'Bags I drive.'

'Oh no you don't, not in my brand new, bloody expensive vehicle.' She chased Sam through the office and onto the street, only half aware of the cheers and whistles from the rest of the audience.

As Sydney celebrated the start of a new century, Sam and Maguire lay in bed. 'I could,' Maguire said thoughtfully, 'make some really bad jokes about fireworks.'

'Don't,' said Sam, and kissed her just to make sure she couldn't. Maguire pulled closer, and ran a hand over Sam's stomach, gently feeling the curves of her ribs.

Sam broke off from the kiss to protest. 'Hey, that tickles!'

'The broken one's healed nicely,' Maguire said, her fingers circling over one particular spot. All the bones were smooth under her hand.

'I haven't had a broken rib.' Sam propped herself up on one elbow, and pulled the sheet towards her. She looked down at the spot Maguire had been feeling, then back up.

'Ah,' Maguire said. She was silent for a moment. Outside, a firework bled across the sky. The trails of red stayed in the air for a few seconds before disappearing. 'Then I guess you've got that to look forward to.'

'Want to tell me how it happens?' There were cheers outside the window now; must be getting close to midnight.

'Want to hear the Doctor's story about how one butterfly flapping its wings can change the course of an entire civilisation?'

Sam got out of bed, and padded across to the window. Her body was lit up by the lights outside. 'Not really. I know what he's like.'

'Butterfly in every port,' Maguire got out of bed and stood behind her. She placed her hands on Sam's shoulders and together they gazed out at the window.

'Temporal paradox in every port,' Sam said. 'Tonight's an example, you know. We had to be in the Southern Hemisphere tonight because there are too many of him running around England and the States.'

'And here was I thinking that you just wanted to spend New Years with me,' Maguire said lightly.

Sam glanced back at her, trying to gauge her mood.

Outside, there were cries of 'Happy New Year!' and the fireworks were brighter than before. Maguire felt something in her stomach, that was exactly like and nothing like airsickness. Sam reeled and clutched at the sill. The whole room shuddered, and a wave of pure energy washed over them. For a spilt-second, Maguire felt like she was going to be sick, then all of a sudden the tide was gone.

'What the hell was that?'

Sam leant against the wall. 'You really want to know?'

'Sure.'

'Well, that was the Earth being pulled inside out by the force from the Eye of Harmony, because the Master accidentally opened it after he'd taken over the body of an ambulance driver who tried to kill the

Doctor. Only it didn't really happen because the Eye took the TARDIS back a couple of days and made everything all right again. And the Doctor got to snog this surgeon who's to die for.'

'Thought so. Just checking.'

After that visit, Maguire started keeping a diary. She had no hope of working out Sam's exact timeline, but it helped her keep track of continuity. It was weird. Like having your own personal fortuneteller. She'd pop in and out every few months, stay for a couple of days, and invariably let something slip about the future. Maguire's future - Sam's past. Maguire tried not to mention Sam's future.

Sam showed up six months later with a broken rib. Six months after that she turned up with hair down to her waist. The time after that, it was back to her shoulders.

And there'd be conversations left unfinished for months, or ended before they'd even begun. Sam would answer questions before Maguire had asked them, and Maguire would ask about adventures that hadn't happened yet. But the sex was good and the company was fun if you avoided talking about things that mattered. And it was nice to go to sleep with your arms around someone and realise that you weren't alone in the universe.

Wasn't it?

The day Maguire turned thirty, she came home from work to find the house full of old friends. The Brigadier, the Doctor, and half of Australian UNIT were crammed into the lounge room. Sam was bustling round the kitchen, making sure that there were enough spinach triangles. Maguire pinned her against the fridge, and gave her a long kiss.

'Twice in one day?' she said.

Sam blinked. 'What do you mean?' She looked up at Maguire's face, and noticed a couple of wrinkles, a couple of blemishes that hadn't been there the last time she looked.

'You were here this morning. Gave me breakfast in bed.'

'I did? I mean, I guess I will.'

Maguire nodded. 'I was a bit worried about you. You seemed petty

upset.'

'Don't tell me about it.' Sam held up a hand. 'He's getting more sensitive about continuity errors.'

'Can't you try and make it in sequence a bit more, then? That'd make things easier.'

'It's not always that easy,' Sam said. 'Last week it was a Code Five in Brisbane. Yesterday we were at the opening of Disneyland. Try telling a Time Lord to keep time.'

She was so flippant, and it was pissing Maguire off. But she forced three years worth of frustration back below the surface and stood, hands on hips, as Sam took another tray of canapes out of the oven.

'They smell good,' she said at last. Sam smiled, and headed for the lounge room. Maguire glanced around the kitchen and frowned - my god, were there any of her pots and pans that Sam and the Doctor hadn't used? She took a couple of deep breaths and tried not to think about the inevitable washing up

When she was sure that Sam had left, Maguire reached for the locket. It had been a birthday present from Sam this morning, Sam from goodness-knows-where in the timeline. Inside, there was a photo of them taken a couple of years back at a work's party. On the back was an inscription - *All the time in the world*. She wondered what it meant.

Six months later, she woke up to a winter's storm, and saw Sam standing at the foot of her bed. Her hair was long again, and for a moment she didn't recognise who she was. 'Oh. Sam. Hi.'

'How could you?' The words burst from Sam's mouth.

Maguire rubbed her eyes, and sat up. Wide awake now. 'Pardon?'

'In case you didn't hear me the first time,' Sam said, her voice dripping ice, 'I said "How. Could. You?"

She waved a thick wad of paper in front of Maguire. Maguire saw the Official Secrets Act stamp on the front, and felt her stomach churning. 'Oh, shit.'

'This is the matter,' Sam said. 'A UNIT file. On me. And guess who's written most of it?'

'I...'

'How could you, Jac? How could you treat me like some bloody piece of paperwork.'

'Sammie, it's not like that.' She looked back at Sam, trying to work out when they'd both started changing.

'Convince me,' Sam spat back. She folded her arms, the file snapping around and ending up under an arm.

'UNIT's just a bunch of fanboys and fangirls who get their kicks every time the Doctor shows up. They speak about him in whispers. The man's a god to us, okay? There's a two thousand page manual on what to do if you ever run into him.'

'Where do I come into it?' Some of the brash confidence left Sam's voice as she asked. She looked like a little kid, and Maguire had to stop herself reaching out a hand. Instead, she pulled her doona closer.

'It's not just you; they've got files on all the companions. They've been tracking them from the day they disappeared to the day they were returned, to what's happening to them now. Jovanka's running a charter pilot business. Harris is a paranoid alcoholic. Jackson's been suffering PTSD for the past twenty 20 years.'

'And that makes it right, does it?' Sam flipped the file across the bed at her. It hit her arm, then dropped to the floor like a dead bird.

'It's the way we do things, okay? Sammie, I'm military. They love their paperwork.' She knew she'd said the wrong thing. Sam's face crumbled, and her shoulders dropped a little.

'Yeah,' Sam said. 'That's what you really love, isn't it.' She turned, and walked towards the bedroom door. Before she got there, her body faded and disappeared, leaving Maguire alone in the room.

Maguire punched her pillow. She threw the file across the room. Then she punched the wall and waited for the pain to kick in. The rain drummed down harder on the roof.

Sam glanced up at the sky. It looked like it had been raining, or was about to rain. She didn't know which, and she didn't really care. She looked back down at the ground. The scent of freshly mown grass and dying flowers was thick in the air. Sam felt like the smells were gently wrapping themselves around her neck, waiting for the right moment to cut off her breathing.

They stopped in front of the grave. No, she wasn't going to call it that. She was going to think of it as a hole in the ground, because if she thought of it as a grave, then she'd have to think of the dead person inside it.

Oh, god.

Everything was suddenly overwhelming - the smells, the half-bright sunshine, the distant sound of a lawnmower. She put out a hand to steady herself and took a couple of deep breaths. The Doctor's voice, as if from a distance, filtered through. 'Sam, Sam, are you all right?'

She flapped a hand at him. It was supposed to be reassuring, but it looked like she was just trying to swat flies. 'Fine, thanks.' Yeah, my girlfriend's in a hole in the ground, and I'm fucking fine. Can't you see that?

The headstone was small and neat, just one in a row of hundreds. *Jacqueline Frances Maguire, born 29-2-1972, died 26-10-2036. Rest in Peace.* A tiny UNIT logo underneath.

'Frances,' Sam said 'I never knew she had a middle name.'

Something moved in her peripheral vision. It was the Doctor, putting a bunch of flowers down in front of the headstone. His lips were pressed together tightly, and something glistened in his eye. 'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I know it's no consolation, but she died in her sleep.'

'You're right, it isn't any consolation.' She bit her lip until the trembling had stopped, and then looked back up at him. 'I want to see her. I want to say goodbye properly.'

He nodded, and slung an arm around her shoulder. She wondered whose benefit that was for. There were strange little tremors running through his body, too, and she wondered if Time Lords cried. Or maybe they'd lost that emotion when they'd lost the ability to have children.

They walked slowly back to the TARDIS.

Inside, he made a mug of tea, watching her every second. He put in twice as many tea leaves and a generous spoonful of sugar, and watched while she drank it. Finally, she set down the mug with a thump. 'I'm fine, damn it. Why do you keep staring at me like that?' She was surprised to find that her voice was shaking.

He jumped, and she realised that he was nervous. Him, nervous? That was a good one.

'I -' he said, and found something interesting to look at on the floor. 'Nearly there,' he said, still not meeting her gaze.

The house hadn't changed much since her last visit. A little bit older, the paintwork a little bit duller. The grass hadn't been mowed in a while and there was a ginger cat snoozing on the lawn. As Sam opened the front gate, the cat opened one lazy eye, glared for a moment, then went back to sleep.

Sam stood on the doorstep, shuffling from one foot to another. She lifted up a hand to the doorbell, stretched out, and dropped it back to her side. Coward, she scolded. What are you afraid of? It's not as if she'll recognise you. It's not as if she'll still care...

With that, she pressed the doorbell viciously, and stood back. Silence. Maybe she's not home, Sam said. Out playing Bingo or whatever it is that they do when they get old. From inside the house there was a shuffling, coming closer. Before Sam could force her legs move, to run away, the door opened.

The woman standing there was older, more wrinkled, but unmistakably Maguire. Her hair was greying now, and she stooped a little. She looked up at Sam, with eyes that were a little cloudy.

'Can I help you?'

Sam was just about ready to turn and run away. 'I'm sorry, I -'

Maguire reached out and placed a hand on her sleeve. 'Sam?' She spoke slowly, softly. 'Sammie, it is you?'

'Yeah.'

The elderly woman took two quick steps forward, and wrapped her arms around Sam. For a moment, Sam stood uncomfortably, then she surrendered to the embrace. She carefully hugged Maguire, resting her chin on the woman's shoulder. She'd hugged her Gran, of course, but this was different. So different.

She was surprised to find that they were both crying. Maguire wiped the tears from Sam's face with one bony finger. 'I don't look that bad, now, do I?'

'S'not that,' Sam sniffled. 'It's just that it's been so long, and...'

'And I'm old and boring,' Maguire smiled. She looked down at Sam's

unlined face. 'I could never forget you, you know that.'

'You're not boring,' Sam hiccupped.

Maguire produced a tissue from somewhere, and dabbed at Sam's face. 'Where's that Doctor of yours? Off saving the universe?'

'Actually,' Sam said between each deep breath, 'I think he's off somewhere talking to trees.' She suddenly became aware that they were still holding each other like lovers, and that they were still on Maguire's doorstep. She took half a step backwards. Maguire noticed the movement, and loosened her grip. 'Do you want to come inside?'

'I've got a better idea.'

They sat on the beach, eating fish and chips. A flock of seagulls were hovering round them, squawking every time they picked up a chip. The man in the takeaway had smiled, and said it was nice to see Sam taking her Gran out for the day. Sam had pretended not to hear him. As they'd left, she'd slung an arm around Maguire's waist, mainly to see his reaction.

'Have I told you I'm sorry?' Sam said.

'That's the fourth time,' Maguire smiled. 'What you haven't told me is why here, why now.'

Sam threw a chip to the nearest pile of seagulls, and watched as they fought over it. 'We were just passing through, you know, and I thought I'd look you up.' One of the seagulls emerged with the chip, and flew down the beach.

Maguire put a hand on her knee. 'I can always tell when you're lying. Sammie, is this goodbye?'

'Don't ask me that!' Sam turned around to face her. 'Please, just don't.'

Maguire nodded slowly. 'So be it. My will is in order, although you don't have to come to the reading. And I'll understand if you miss the funeral. I always hated them, myself.'

Sam shook her head. 'You're not supposed to take it this calmly.' The seagulls took off, wheeling away to the left where a figure was walking along the beach towards them. The Doctor.

'Sam, Sam, when you're as old and as cynical as I am, it doesn't really matter. It's been fun, and seeing you again today has made it all

worthwhile.'

Sam was crying now, but trying not to show it. Her shoulders shook once, twice. She stared down at the ground tracing patterns in the sand. Maguire's hands came into view, clutching the locket. She pressed it into Sam's hand.

'I don't want it,' Sam said, still looking down at the sand.

Maguire's hand closed over hers for a moment. 'Take it, Sammie. Think of me.'

The Doctor was about ten yards away from them now. He stopped walking, glanced down at his watch, then looked out to sea. He'd taken off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. For a moment, you might have thought he was unimportant.

'Time to go, I think,' Maguire said.

Sam nodded. She was crying again. 'He said we couldn't stay long. Something to do with the Blinovitch Limitation Effect and a future self being round this area.'

'Even a Time Lord needs to keep time, I guess,' Maguire said. She leaned over, and gave Sam a peck on the lips.

Sam felt the dry skin rustling past her, and returned the kiss. Then she pulled herself to her feet and brushed the sand off. 'God, I feel like there's so much I haven't said.'

Maguire nodded, rolling up the newspaper and remains of their lunch. 'Take care.'

'You too.' Sam slowly walked back to the Doctor, leaving Maguire staring out at the sea. The Doctor raised one eyebrow at her.

'Okay, I guess.' Sam said, rubbing her eyes across her sleeve. 'But once more - please? There's something I have to do.'

Jacqueline Maguire woke up on her thirtieth birthday to find a full English breakfast on her bedside table, and Sam asleep next to her. She ate a slice of toast, then put a hand on Sam's shoulder. She hesitated. The kid looked exhausted. She left the hand there for a minute, then took it away. The slight movement woke Sam.

'Mppph?'

'What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?'

'Wishing you a happy birthday.' From under her pillow, Sam

produced a small wrapped box. She passed it over to Maguire. She wasn't making eye contact, just staring down at the sheets.

Maguire pulled Sam towards her. 'Thanks.'

'I love you, you know,' Sam said. Then she clapped her hands over her mouth, as if to stop the words escaping. Too late.

"Course I know,' Maguire said. She squeezed Sam on the shoulder, and pulled at the wrapping paper with the other hand. The bow was taped to the paper, but eventually it she managed to get it unwrapped.

She looked up at Sam. 'God, Sammie, this is gorgeous.' She held up a locket on a gold chain.

Sam nodded, looking down at the bedclothes again. 'Read the inscription.'

Maguire squinted down at it. 'All the time in the world.'

She didn't know why Sam's eyes were filling with tears again.

Just Love

GREGG SMITH

Is it much to ask?

Maybe it is. It's not easy, I know. It's not easy to ask. But I will:

Tell me your story.

I guess it starts with Simon. He's bad blood, of course, but has always been very important to me.

He came to me when I was on the run. I remember his strong, supple curves, the roundness of his shoulders and hips, his bollocks. Downy hair on his arms and legs, across his chest. Scruffy, occasional patches of stubble on his face. The freckles across his nose, the flop of tawny hair across his forehead. His half smile. His hands, fingers and tongue all over me, playing with me. Playing with me. I wonder now how much he knew what he was doing. How much came naturally, how much was learnt, how much guesswork and experimentation.. He took the initiative; I helped as I could, followed his lead.

I love you, Simon says.

After the first time, in that stark, sweaty silence, in my shelter in the woods, I asked him to tell me a story. That didn't seem silly to me at the time.

So, he told me a story.

The war goddess, Boann, is the wife of Nechtan, a river god. But she has sex with the Daghdha.

The Daghdha, Lord of the Otherworld, has a club of death and resurrection and a cauldron of never-ending hospitality. He sleeps with Boann, the war goddess, to secure victory for his people. I do not know why she sleeps with him. They have a son, Oenghus, known as Anguish.

Whether infidelity curses Boann I cannot say, but one day she visits Nechtan's well. Nine hazel trees border the well; their hazelnuts give knowledge of all things in the world. They fall into the water, and

are eaten by salmon - the only creatures allowed this knowledge. All others are forbidden from eating the nuts, from even approaching the well. Even the highest gods. Even Nechtan.

As Boann approaches, the waters rise up in a torrent that engulfs her, and becomes the River Boyne. The salmon are carried away into forgetfulness. Soon after, one is caught and eaten by the great hero, the hunter-poet, Finn mac Coul. He takes all the wisdom it has left. The rest will wander the rivers forever, searching for their lost knowledge.

Oenghus is the youthful god of love. His kisses become birds and butterflies, whispering songs of love into the ears of the men and women they find. He lives in Brugh-na-Boyne, a fairy palace on the banks of the river that is the last rest of his mother.

Much time passes, and much love.

Diarmait, a handsome and youthful warrior; a follower of the hunter poet Finn, is foster-son to Oenghus. Grainne is betrothed to Finn, now an ageing widower, against her will. On the night of the wedding feast, in the great banquet hall at Tara, she sees Diarmait and falls in love with him. She drops a potion into a goblet, sends it to Finn and his heroes, to all the guests at the feast. All except Diarmait.

Everyone falls asleep, and Grainne confesses her love to Diarmait. Though he feels the same attraction, he cannot betray Finn. As the others begin to wake, Grainne reminds Diarmait that he is bound to help and protect those who are in love, so must help her. Against his will, Diarmait elopes with Grainne.

When Finn and his men pursue, Oenghus spirits the pair away to safety.

Diarmait and Grainne wander through Connacht and Munster, eventually becoming lovers. They live happily until the day of the great hunt of the magic boar of Beann Ghulban, in Sligo. The boar gores Diarmait and his only chance of survival is a drink of water from the hunter-poet's healing hands.

Finn comes with water, but when he remembers Grainne he lets it trickle through his fingers.

He comes a second time, but again he thinks of Grainne and lets the water trickle away. Diarmait dies, and Finn's part in this causes a rift in his clan that will never be healed.

Oenghus takes Diarmait's body to Brugh-na-Boyne.

Of course, Simon betrayed me. And in so doing, he changed my life.

Before that? Before Simon?

When I was just a little girl, I had a rag doll. She was called Rebecca. I clutched her tight every night from as long ago as I can remember right up until I was seven. Rebecca was a gift, and I loved her at first sight. A simple comfort, an innocent love. Rebecca died when I was seven. So did my mother. My mother died trying to save Rebecca. That didn't seem silly to me at the time.

My mother died in the wars, like so many mothers it seems. She died running, died rescuing my doll. Does that mean she died because she loved me, or because I loved Rebecca? Or both?

She was strong, kind. She knew everything.

Once upon a time, a powerful sorceress lived alone in an old castle deep in the forest. By daylight, this old wise woman haunted the forest in the shape of an owl. Her daughters had been lost to the cold winters many years before. Her son survived but she hated him for it, cursed him and sent him away. She had grown bitter and made a magic circle to keep everyone away - anyone coming within fifty paces of her castle was rooted to the spot until the spell was lifted. A virgin girl entering the circle would be transformed into a golden songbird and shut away in a wicker cage.

Now, a beautiful maiden called Della and her betrothed, a youth called Dalziel, lived in a village near the forest. One day, this pair sought to be alone together and wandered amongst the trees. It was a beautiful day; the forest was rich and alive. But soon, they realised they were lost. The sun was disappearing fast and they did not know the way home.

Della settled on a log in a clearing. Dalziel looked around frantically and saw the old castle. He was strangely filled with terror

and turned to Della. But she was gone, a nightingale perching where she had been.

An owl swooped down into the clearing, eyes aflame and screeching to wake the dead. Dalziel tried to run for the trees but could not move. He was frozen to the spot. The sun was gone now, and the owl flew into the bushes. A moment later, an old woman hobbled out, bent heavily on a stick and wrapped in a blue cloak trimmed with fur and feathers. One of her eyes was solid crimson and her fingers were gnarled talons. The nightingale flew to her hand, singing sadly as the sorceress walked away. Realizing his love had been transformed by the crone's magic, Dalziel fought to follow but could not even blink away the, tears welling in his eyes.

When the sun rose, Dalziel was freed and ran to a village on the far side of the forest. He was sad, but the people of the village took him in. He became a shepherd, to repay his debt to the villagers and to occupy his body and mind.

One day, whilst tending sheep on the hills, he settled down to lunch. A wily raven flew down and stole half of his pie. At first he was angry, but he thought the raven had as much right to eat as he did. He took bread with him the next day, and fed it to the raven.

That night, he dreamt of a crimson flower. The sun touched its petals and they opened to reveal a flawless pearl. In his dream, Dalziel took the flower to the castle. Everything it touched was freed from magic. He awoke with a fresh sense of hope and set out into the world in search of the jewel. He travelled far and wide but could find it nowhere. After many months, he reached the coast and could go no further. He tethered his horse and slept on the beach, so overcome with grief he cared not if he lived or died.

The next morning, the caws of a raven woke him. He could not help but think it was the raven he had fed in the hills, so many months before.

'I regret, I have nothing for you, ' he told the raven.

But the raven bowed his head and opened his beak and inside was the crimson flower with a pearl at its centre. Dalziel rode straight for

the forest, the winged thief flying above him.

It was night when he arrived, walking to the castle. He came within fifty paces and marched on unhindered. He touched the flower against the castle walls and a gate appeared. The sorceress was angry and spat poison, but he held the flower up and she withdrew. Inside, there was a great chamber filled with songbirds in wicker cages. How could he know which was his Della? Then the raven flew straight to a certain cage. Dalziel opened it and the bird flew to his hand, touched the flower, and there stood Della.

The sorceress sprang across the room, shrieking. But Dalziel threw the flower at her, and she halted. All the cages sprang open; all the birds flew out and turned back into girls. The sorceress could no longer work harmful magic.

The raven flew to Dalziel 's feet, and then a boy stood in its place.

'I am the sorceress' son,' he said. 'She cursed me, but now I am free.'

Dalziel and Della left the castle and returned home to the open arms of their families. They lived happily ever after. The boy stayed. By day, when his mother was a cat or an owl, he lived in human form and cared for her. But at night, he transformed himself into a raven and watched over all the children of the village as they slept.

When I was just a little girl, my mum and dad used to sit on the end of my bed, and they would tell me stories. I was sad when my mother died. But I knew, deep down, that things would be OK. That my father would come.

My father died in the wars, like so many fathers it seems. He died running, died in battle. He was big, a mountain, a god in my toddling world. I didn't see him at the end, and was alone and sad. But I knew, deep down, that things would be OK. That someone would come.

Hermes, herald of the gods, was the son of Zeus and of Maia, the daughter of Atlas. He was born in Arcadia and grew fast. Whenever his mother's back was turned, he would slip away in search of adventures. He was taught to see the future by the same wise women

who had taught that art to Apollo. In turn, he taught the Olympians the skill of fire-making. It was Hephaestus, the crippled Smith-god, who made most use of this skill.

Among Zeus' many daughters was Aphrodite, the goddess of love, given in marriage to Hephaestus. She bore him children, but their true father was Ares, the god of War. Ares and Aphrodite were lovers. One night, they lay together too long in Ares' bed. Helius the Sun-god saw them as he rose, and he told Hephaestus.

Furious and humiliated, the Smith-god returned to his forge. There, he wove a hunting net from the finest bronze. He strung it above his bed, tying it to the ivory posts, so that it would slowly drift down. He told Aphrodite that he would journey to Lemnos for a holiday. She did not offer to go with him.

Aphrodite called Ares and the two spent the night together in Hephaestus' bed. But when the morning came, Hephaestus' net had drifted down. They became entangled in it, naked and trapped. Hephaestus, who had turned back in the night, found them and swore to divorce Aphrodite. He promptly summoned the gods to witness his wife's disgrace. The goddesses stayed away, out of propriety.

'Would you not love to be in Ares' place, beneath that net with Aphrodite?' Apollo said to Hermes.

'I would,' replied the herald of the gods, laughing. 'Even if there were three nets and all the goddesses were looking on. '

Hephaestus would not release his wife until Zeus returned the dowry that had been paid. Zeus refused in disgust. Poseidon, god of the oceans, concealed his envy of Ares. He had fallen in love with the sight of Aphrodite naked, but pretended to sympathise with Hephaestus: 'If Zeus will not return what is due to you, I suggest Ares

pay the sum in exchange for his freedom.'

Ares agreed, but Hephaestus was unsure.

'If Ares breaks his promise, Poseidon, you must take his place under the net. '

'It is unthinkable that Ares would do such a thing. But if he does I will pay the sum and marry Aphrodite myself.'

Ares was freed, and Aphrodite too. She renewed her purity in the ocean at Paphos. For his compliments, Aphrodite slept with Hermes. She bore him the double-sexed child, Hermaphroditus.

Of course, Ares did break his promise, and would not pay. But did not matter. Hephaestus loved Aphrodite unconditionally and, for all her wandering, he would not divorce her.

Someone did come, one day. A very special someone.

A perpetual pattern or structure possessing qualities as a whole that cannot be described merely as a sum of its parts.

An advocate of revolution, toppling empires with a wink though he may be first against the wall. A fighter, a trickster, a spright in search of a spring. A plotter and player, shining light in all the dark places. He takes his energy from the borders of the universe, looks down from on high. He feels sorry for the other, overlooked worlds, pays them peculiar attention.

He found me, corporation T-shirt and academic mask, and showed me everything. He taught me more than I thought there was left to know. I loved him, because he was kind, because I could love him even if I hated him, because he knew and was still learning. Knew he was still learning and always would be, no matter how much he wanted to believe he had all the answers.

He told me a lot of stories, and I told him some. And then, together, we went and told stories to the universe.

Hathor, mother of kings, the Eye of Ra, helps women to have children. She also welcomes souls to the underworld and suckles them. Within her is the embodiment of ecstasy and destruction.

One day, the Eye of Ra quarrelled with her father and ran away to the distant Nubian Desert. There, she became Bastet, the cat goddess

of love, sex and fertility.

Thoth, the moon god, the magician, disguised himself as a baboon and went south in her tracks.

Thoth is the peace of the gods, but be warned, for he is merciless with the enemies of truth. He found her, and charmed her with a story to stop her attacking him. Then he talked of Egypt to make her sick for home.

But she was not fooled, and turned into Sekhmet, the lioness goddess, the Powerful One, the slaughterer whose words are disease and whose priests are doctors. Thoth told more stories to soothe the lion, and promised many offerings in the temples of Egypt, persuading her to return north with him.

Sekhmet and Thoth entered Egypt, and crowds of people and much rejoicing greeted the goddess. The two gods walked together through the desert and along the great river. At Thebes, while Sekhmet slept, Thoth watched over her and cared for her. A serpent of chaos attacked the goddess as she was dreaming, but Thoth awoke her and saved her, crushing the serpent in his fist.

They reached Heliopolis, and the goddess was re-united with her father and became Hathor, the golden lady of heaven, once again.

A: What if love itself is just a story?

B: Would that make it less real, less vibrant, less important?

C: Stories can't represent reality.

D: They represent a discourse of reality. Nothing can represent reality successfully, nothing can truly comprehend it. Reality is too uncertain.

R: But there must be more to love.

D: Why? Don't analyse, utilise. If you can feel it, why can't you accept it?

B: I... I can't.

D: Why can't you just sit back and enjoy the view?

A: Maybe the dead bodies keep getting in the way. I've known many men with two faces, but he took the proverbial. He changed completely, though he was the same in the most important ways. When

I first saw what he had become, I was heartbroken. The man I had known was dead and gone, taken away by this new pretender. My feelings changed. You could say I loved him even more as a stranger. But that was different.

'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.

'From his very creation, Merlin had been an outcast, the half-breed son of a demon, raised by a hermit. Devil's blood ran through him, fiery and dark.

'I have told you of his place in Camelot, and at the hearths of Vortigern, Ambrosius and Uther. Now I tell you of a time late in Merlin's life. He had lived cold and alone for many years, but one day he saw the lady Vivienne and fell in love. Though fearful of the devil inside him, she came to return Merlin's affections. She too had always lived in isolation, and they shared their seclusion. They spent much time together, journeying the land. Vivienne asked Merlin to teach her his arts, and gladly he taught her some enchantment and a little divination, how to hear the music in the air and how to move stones with song.

'Whilst Merlin was abroad, Arthur's rule faltered. The enchanter had counselled against the old king's marriage to the young Guinevere, saying she would betray him. And she did. Arthur's heart was broken and the kingdom with it. Arthur's love for Guinevere, and hers for Lancelot, doomed Camelot. The kingdom cracked as it had under Uther, as it has many times since.

'Having warned of the danger of infatuation, Merlin was prey to it himself. He was a fool of love, trusted Vivienne, taught her what she wanted to know - all the while thinking only of what he could do with her body, not what he was doing to her mind. And when she had sufficient skill, she turned Merlin's magic against him.

'She took him to the Ice Caves, and they lay together. Afterwards, as he slept, she cast ice from all around to bind him - he could not move. There he has remained since, dreaming of his love. Vivienne visits him from time to time. He was so full of life once, and seeing him like that hurts her deeply. But she will not let him go. ' The

storyteller paused, gazing into the dying fire.

Then, a girl in the audience spoke. 'You've told us of this before, but it was Morgaine, not Vivienne.'

Feeling cheated, a boy added, 'And another time it was Nimue, and Merlin was imprisoned by thorns, not ice. Is this just the same story?'

The storyteller smiled, still gazing at the embers. 'The story is always the same. Only the details change. And sometimes the meaning. Some say Merlin knew how the story would end; even that he allowed Vivienne to trap him. For he knew his spirit had softened as his will had grown hard; the devil's blood needed cooling, else hell's plans for him might still have born fruit.

'Others say he was not trapped at all, but retired to the forest, living as a wild man or in an observatory. Or else he sailed across the ocean in a glass house, taking his secrets with him but leaving just enough magic to keep the world turning. The old ways may fade, but they never disappear completely.

'Merlin's great exploits have been well documented, handed down through the generations. But there was much in his life that has yet to be told; some deeds good or dark that may never be revealed. Look inside your heart, you may find you yourself know some of his secrets, the unknown things he did long ago, and the things he will do when his chains of ice melt.

'For Merlin will come again. Merlin will live forever. But nothing lasts that does not change.'

How could my love for Rebecca have been real? She didn't even have opposable thumbs. Simon was a bastard, bandaged in broken promises, astride a broken heart. I was so young when mum and dad died. They'd always been there, seemed to love me, that's why I loved them. Can simple reciprocation be love? There's himself. But more than anything, he's a friend (another problematic concept, of course).

Of course, there is Jason. My (ex) husband. A man who is to humanity as sarcasm is to wit.

When we married, I thought that was the end. A good end. We'd keep going, but there had been an ending. The mysteries had been

solved, the tale was over. A state I could live in forever. And when we broke up, I thought that was the end, another state I could live in forever, as far as we were concerned. Now I keep going back and forth. And I think it's driving me mad.

I dig through history, I know it repeats. Peeling back the layers, seeing how people made mistakes, how those mistakes were the same ones their parents made - though often for different reasons. It's horrible to realise you've made the same mistakes as your parents, to watch your children making the same mistakes you did. And to watch yourself making the same mistakes you made last time.

The planet Youkali, 2587
(Extracts from the diary of Bernice Kane-Summerfield)

I'm hopping up and down as I write this. Some of the trainees uncovered an architrave from the east face of temple roof. It's buried but intact. When that end of the roof collapsed inwards, the entablature landed safely and face up.

It has a relief, a detailed narrative in hieroglyphs. And I found it! Well, I told the kids where to start digging. I've already translated some of it, as they cleaned the dirt away. (I couldn't contain myself - and why not?) So, what follows, oh reader, is a rather freehand and culturally relative presentation. A more academic translation will no doubt be found amongst my research notes (if those of you in the dim and distant future have got your hands on them as well, then please note how articulate and accurate I can be when I want). Here goes:

The Many-man (ed note: literal translation) arrived from the clouds and went to the village of Akhani on high ground. He was looking for a thing, a shape that was always changing. It never had the same number of sides or the same patterns on its surface, and it was never in the same place twice. He explained that the shape was a prison to all people. The walls of the prison were inside themselves, and that was why nobody could ever escape.

The villagers knew nothing of this thing. So, the Many-man told them his story: Once, Garva the itinerant, a warrior of great skill but

also a cleric with much learning, able to talk with beggars and with kings, a brave woman who followed the Wanderer, had found the shape.'

(Ed note: The glyph naming this character is one half of the name of a settlement to the east of here, first excavated twenty odd years ago by the late Prof. Herb Burridge - a site he called Ralang-Garva. So, this character's name could be 'an itinerant from Ralang-Garva'. I have decided to simply call her 'Garva'. And I can do that, because it's my translation. So there.)

'She had broken it and freed all the people. But the prison was also a shield. It had protected the people from devils that lived outside. (Ed. note: Women always make things worse - a universal constant in early myth, and there's nothing new here.) And it had protected the devils from the people. The woman saw this, and realised that the devils and the people could not live together. She put all the pieces together again. But it didn't fit properly - one piece was missing.'

Uncovered some more this morning. I'll plow right in.

'It so happened that Garva's heart was the same shape as the hole that was left. Fearful of what might happen if the devils and the people met, the woman put her heart into the hole. And, as soon as she did, the shape changed again, and her heart was consumed. She was empty without it.

'The Wanderer (ed note: a common, minor deity) came to Garva the itinerant, and took her to the Many-man. The Many-man was a craftsman, and he fashioned a new heart for her from the workings of an old clock. She was very happy, and she fell in love with the Many-man. Together, they followed the path of the Wanderer, fighting devils who had come into the realm of people while the shape had been broken. They were very happy together, until one day they encountered the Collector. He had been fascinated by Garva's clockwork heart. He attacked Garva and flew away with her heart.

'Garva the itinerant was empty once more. She could not love the Many-man. She tried to, but she was not sure what she felt for him. She would not fight the devils - she did not care about the people

anymore. She did nothing because she no longer knew what she wanted to do or what mattered to her. It was as if she had been turned to stone.

'The Many-man was searching the realm. At first, he had pursued the Collector, to get back the heart he had made. But the Collector was too quick for him, and always flew away before he could be captured. So now, the Many-man was searching for the prison shape, hoping to recover Garva 's original heart. His quest was perilous, but he loved Garva. '

Did having a heart crafted by the Many-man make Garva love him? In which case, if the Many-man found her original heart and gave it back to her, she might still not love him. How could she be any surer about how she felt with his heart than with no heart? And why didn't Many-man just make a new heart? Too literal an interpretation? Think again.

I'm trying not to wake Jason. There's so much else I had to do today. Even if I can use this story in my paper, I'm wasting a lot of time translating it when I should be doing other things. But I want to do it. But because of this story, I'm not paying enough attention to my real work. I hate missing deadlines. I'm a little drunk now.

The villagers approached the Many-man after the story been told. Though they knew nothing of the prison shape, they know that the Collector lived near the village of Akhani on ground. He lived in a mountain palace called Marrhal (ed. note an extinct volcano that is a prominent landmark on this plateau and is name-checked in many writings found at nearby sites. Again, first named by Burridge). They said they would help Many-man to fight the Collector and rescue the clockwork - for the story had been a good one.

All the men and women of the village took weapons went to the mountain with the Many-man. They fought their way up to the palace - a hard journey. The Collector sent a flock of razor-birds to attack them, and water-worms to dig up already rough tracks and footholds. Thirty of the villagers were killed, by the creatures or on the perilous

path itself. '

A list of names follows, glyphs not in the general lexicon so I can't provide a translation. Very pretty, though. It's important to note that the villagers had non-descriptive names. More tomorrow.

Fuck. That's all I can say. BUGGER!!! We uncovered some of the architrave. It's blank. No hieroglyphs. The story finished. High up and so detailed, those who visited the temple could never have read the relief. Maybe it was never meant to read. Maybe the story was simply a record of the deaths of those thirty villagers, maybe in real events similar to those in the story. Perhaps that's the whole purpose of the temple - a memorial of sort. But there is a gap at the end of the architrave, suggesting there was meant to be more to the story. Maybe the masons ran out of time, missed their deadline.

I can't stand not knowing how it ended. Jason says I should make up the ending. I told him that was silly. He said any ending I came up with was as valid as the original one. I can't believe that. I want to know how it was meant to end.

Do I have to tell you about love? That tingly-warm-chocolate-razor blades feeling. Finding yourself through somebody else's eyes. A gamble with everything staked on a backward glance or a fraction of a touch, a demented merry-go-round that makes even grey days bright. Lonesome notes in the darkness, outside some club, alone in your bed, staked out on the floor. Euphoria and aporia simultaneously, an undiscovered country, and various stock epithets. Some things are too broad or too deep to be explained.

You can't describe love, any more than you can describe nature, only your relationship to it. And when you examine that, the love itself is changed.

Every instance of love in my life is caged in doubt. Because my experiences don't meet my expectations, don't live up to the ones I've known in stories? Or because they do, and therefore seem like a cliché, unreal? Perhaps I could set that as a question for next term's Coursework.

Though I can't be sure that love lives, I am sure it dies. Why live for

love, knowing the power it may have to hurt? They say pain and doubt is eventually forgotten. I don't believe that. Pain is routed by joy, and the ghost of pain always makes the joy stronger. Doubt diversifies, goes elsewhere.

Rebecca couldn't love me back, but why should that matter? Sim betrayed me, but I kept silent *because* I loved him. I never forgot my mum and dad, their voices, the warmth of their arms and their kisses. I thought I'd decided about Jason. That I should have known better, that I'd known Jasons before. But that's not fair. Jason isn't like Simon was. Simon wasn't really like or anyone else. I burn to be with Jason when he's not here. And when I'm with him, I can't wait to get away.

In fairy tales, things happen for no reason except that they should and do. You might hear it told that Boann was the Daghda's wife and never unfaithful, merely curious. To some, Merlin was the antichrist, just a poet to others. And Thoth, like many of his peers, was loved and feared in equal measure.

Stalwart lovers, with lives of age, experience, loyalty. Lovers in masks, a new frock each night. Those who borrow the lover's mask, fearing naivety. Those we're supposed to love, those we're born to love, those we want to love. Those we want to love us. We live at the centre of constellations, pulled through life and time and space by friends, lovers, parents, children, history, future. Pulled by love itself.

And words, of course. If love is just a story, one that we're told or one that we tell ourselves, words are all important. Chat-up lines, greetings cards, love notes and careless whispers, sonnets and songs. Sometimes a quote, a single line, can be so powerful all on its own that it speaks volumes. Other times, such a line can appear silly, obtuse, nothing without the correct context.

Stories are retold, old ideas recycled and made to rub shoulders with new ones. They can't explain reality, or stand-in for it, or even represent it in all its beautiful horror. They can't be expected to. But they give us more bits of the puzzle.

Well, there you go. My story?

I first had some inkling of it when I was a kid. Six, I think. And I have felt that way since, on occasion (or wanted to, anyway). But with

some doubt, with a sense of cynicism about my own feelings, an image of myself just going through the motions.

View love with reason and distance, and it seems unreal. But view reality with reason and distance and reality seems unreal. At least in my experience. I told you about my experience, didn't I? Love's reality doesn't really matter, only its effect. Self-delusion is good for the soul.

Love may be only a story, but stories are the greatest things in the world. Our dreams, our memories, our histories and hopes, they're all stories.

I hope you understand. I love stories. Tell me yours.

On the Town

John Peel

'The Doctor is impossible!'

Leela snapped back to wakefulness immediately, her hand reaching for the sheathed knife at her waist. Then, as she woke, she remembered where she was and who the loud, aggressive and complaining man was. The Peace Ambassador of the Mahari didn't look happy.

'I have often thought so,' Leela agreed, stretching and yawning and clambering to her feet 'Does this mean that the peace negotiations have fallen through?'

Mahari ambassador scratched at his thick beard and shuffled in his furs. Leela liked the look of the man – strong, brooding, with a quick temper and a ready hand for his sword. He would have been quite at home in her own tribe of the Sevateem, and she could see why the Mahari had selected Mahar-Gan to speak for them. The Ishka ambassador, however, was far too like a Tesh for her own tastes – tall, ascetic, bald and withdrawn. That the two men could not agree was far from a surprise to her. That the Doctor believed he could get both sides to stop their age-long warfare seemed to be a blind, foolish hope.

'Oh, that's all concluded,' Mahar-Gan said glumly. 'We've hammered all of the details out fine.'

Leela frowned. 'Then what is the problem?'

'Damn it all to the Seven Dogs of Hell!' the ambassador screamed. Then he looked across at K9. 'No offence intended.'

'None taken,' K9 replied pleasantly, perking up for the first time in hours.

'They don't know how to celebrate!' Mahar-Gan roared. 'That thin streak of misery that the Ishka sent as their spokesman suggested that we should all meditate to celebrate. Meditate!' he spat on the floor. 'A man wants wine – or, better, beer! – and a warm, friendly wench on his

lap.' He eyed Leela with some speculation at this remark. Leela hoped he wouldn't try anything; she really didn't wish to break such a handsome man's arm. The message somehow passed across to the ambassador, who went on: 'Maybe a good fight or two. That's the way to celebrate! Mediate! Pah!' He sent another bolt of saliva onto the carpet.

'I agree,' Leela said, honestly. The Doctor had brought them here to this old house somewhere in a town he called New York, and then had forbidden her to leave while the negotiations were taking place on 'neutral ground'. She'd been bored stiff the whole time. The thought of going out, seeing the sights and partying was a terrible temptation. 'But the Doctor told us not to leave the house, didn't he, K9?'

'Affirmative, mistress,' the robot dog agreed readily. 'His instructions were quite specific. No-one is to leave the house while the negotiations are under way.'

'So?' Mahar-Gan shrugged. 'The negotiations are concluded.'

K9 paused a brief second. 'Then the instructions are no longer in force,' he decided.

'See?' The warrior grinned at Leela. 'Let us take some of the local money and go and enjoy ourselves.' he eyed K9 warily. 'Do you want to come along?'

'No,' the robot replied. 'Seeing sights and drinking alcoholic stimulants until I am sick do not appeal to me. Nor do I require the bodily warmth of mammalian females.'

'More for me, then,' Mahar-Gan said.

Leela was not convinced. There was logic to what he had proposed, and a great deal of temptation. But she had discovered in the past that the Doctor often got quite annoyed when she did things that made sense to her but not to the Doctor. 'I am not certain that we should do this,' she confessed.

'Then let's leave the decision to the gods,' Mahar-Gan said promptly.

'My god was a computer that went mad,' Leela answered. 'And he is now on another world and cannot be consulted in any event.'

'My gods are the spirits of my departed ancestors,' Mahar-Gan explained. 'I don't know whether or not they're stuck back home or

travelled here with me.' He walked to the front door of the house. Beside it was a box containing the leaf-like items that the Doctor had told Leela was the local currency. Mahar-Gan examined the leaves with interest. 'What are these pictures of?'

K9 perked up. 'They are illustrations of deceased leaders of this country,' he announced.

'Ah! These are good people, obviously. They honour their ancestors! An excellent auspice.' Mahar-Gan read the writing, with considerable effort. 'In God We Trust,' he said slowly. Then he turned to Leela in triumph. 'There you are, then! We have to go!'

'How do you work that out?' Leela asked, completely baffled by his logic.

'These leaves have pictures of their honoured ancestors on them,' Mahar-Gan explained patiently. 'They also tell us that these people trust their gods. Now, since this is what the locals use for money, isn't it obvious that they honour their dead by passing these leaves to one another? So, to be polite, we should do the same thing.'

Leela was a little lost by this argument, but it did seem to make sense. Even the Doctor had to agree that they must honour the local dead. She couldn't see how even he could find such a course of action at all inappropriate. She brightened at the thought that there was no way he could start one of his fusses about what she was doing. Whatever happened, The Doctor couldn't get mad at her for it. And, anyway, didn't she deserve a little fun after being so good for so long?

'We should,' she agreed. 'And we shall. Come on.' She led the way to the door. Mahar-Gan stuffed the wad of money into his furs and followed, an anticipatory grin on his face.

Stepping outside the house was something of a shock for Leela, and probably for the ambassador, also, though he covered it up quite well. The Doctor had brought Leela to the Earth a few times before, but it had never been to a place like this. The first thing that hit her was the noise. There were honks and howls that must belong to terrible animals, and there was the sound of machinery, which could only mean that this was a Tesh place. Nowhere could her ears catch the faintest trace of birds or wildlife. What insanity had these people done?

Then there were the sights. Immediately, huge walls of stone rising about her, obviously housing, but of an insane height. What powers could keep these huge cliff-like structures aloft safely? The Doctor's house was a small building, a modest three floors in height, but some of the ones she saw had to be thirty times as tall. And after the buildings, she noticed the cars. In England, she had seen cars, when they had been tracking the Fendahl, but nothing like this! Here there were thousands of the self-propelled carriages, and a lot of the noise was coming from them.

And then the smell. Leela recognized the stench of burning fossil fuel that the cars used to move around. But there were also many scents that were less familiar. They seemed like plant smells, but with a vague unreality about them. It took her a few moments to realize that the people rushing past her were mostly adorned with these fake scents. Probably to confuse predators...

And then there were the people! All shapes, sizes and ages. And, it seemed, all dressed in whatever manner they wished. None of them were decently dressed in furs, or even eccentrically dressed like the Doctor. Some wore odd costumes, others were dressed quite alike. Many wore black eyepieces across faces. None of them seemed to be even the slightest bit interested in Leela or Mahar-Gan. Instead, they rushed off about their own, inscrutable businesses.

'Busy place,' the ambassador muttered. 'Should we ask directions, or just go and look for ourselves?'

Leela wondered much the same thing. Nobody seemed inclined to stop, and she wasn't inclined to halt any of them. 'With this amount of people in this city,' she decided, 'there must be plenty of places for them to eat and drink. We should be able to find one quite swiftly.'

'Makes sense to me,' he agreed. 'Let's go.' He promptly started walking to the north.

Leela took a quick look around to make certain she could find her way back. All she knew from what the Doctor had told her was that the 'address' was 40 Bleeker Street, whatever that meant. It would probably be helpful if she was better at reading, but Leela was quite sure her instincts would enable her to find her way back again. So she set off after the eager ambassador.

He was sniffing the air with a satisfied grin. 'I smell food,' he informed her. 'Well-cooked, almost burnt. Perfect!' He drew her onward.

Crossing the car-pathways took some doing, but they realized that the people living here knew how to do it, so they observed the ritual. Most of them seemed to congregate at intersections and then wait for the cars to stop before plunging across. Some – either trying to attract mates by their daring, or else wishing to sacrifice themselves to the gods – actually just walked through the streams of cars. Not wishing to draw attention to herself, Leela was content to cross with the majority of the people.

'Here,' Mahar-Gan decided, plunging through a doorway Leela sniffed, and had to agree with her companion that the food scents here were exceptionally good. The meat was charred, just the way it should be.

The inside of the room was rather dark, and there were already other people there. There was some kind of terrible music playing, and the soft tones of conversation. A tall man, looking rather pained, approached them. Probably his clothes were too tight, maybe as some sort of ritual punishment. Leela knew better than to interfere with the customs of strangers.

'Two for dinner?' he asked, staring at them.

'Perfect!' Mahar-Gan agreed. 'Take us to the food! And drink of course.'

'This way, please.' The man took two pieces of card from a table by the door, and then led them through the room. He gestured at a small table.

'Gods!' exclaimed Mahar-Gan. 'You couldn't fit a decent meal on a thing this small! We need a larger place to eat!'

'As you wish,' the man replied. He seemed even more pained than before. Perhaps this was another ritual?

'That one,' Mahar-Gan decided, pointing to a larger table, with a long bench behind it. Leela approved his choice; she had been shown the use of chairs, but preferred the more sensible bench, with the wall behind it to lean back on when she was full. The man nodded, and waited till they were seated. He then handed them the two pieces of

cards.

'What are they?' Leela asked, confused.

'The menus,' the man answered. 'You're from out of town?' he sighed.

'Very,' Leela agreed.

'They list the items you can select, and tell you the price of them,' the man explained. 'That way you will know what you want and how much to pay.'

'Stupid bloody system,' Mahar-Gan commented. He pulled the wad of money from his furs, and placed about a quarter of it on the table. 'Bring us food and drink until that runs out,' he ordered. 'And do it quickly.'

The man looked in astonishment at the pile of leaves, and raked them up.

'Wh... Whatever you say,' he agreed. 'Er, would you prefer wine or beer?'

'Whatever,' Mahar-Gan answered generously. 'Just make sure there's plenty of it. We're celebrating!'

The man hurried away. Mahar-Gan turned his attention to the items on the table. 'What in the names of the Unnamed Gods are these?' he asked, staring at the cutlery, and then inspecting each piece.

This was something that Leela knew, thanks to Professor Litefoot. 'They are called eating utensils,' she explained. 'That is a fork; you spear your food with it to hold it. That is a spoon, for eating liquids, like soups. And that is a knife.'

He held up the small implement in disbelief. 'This is a knife?' he asked incredulously. 'Gods, a man couldn't have a decent fight with one of these.' He threw it onto the floor, and pulled out his own knife – a foot long, with an animal horn handle. 'I'll use this.'

'It is a good weapon,' Leela agreed. 'And much more suited in carving meat.'

The nervous man hurried back with two glasses of beer, which he plunked down. Mahar-Gan inhaled one instantly. 'More!' The man hurried off again.

Leela took her time with her own glass. It was a bit too clear for her tastes, and didn't have the right texture, but there was a nice kick from

the alcohol content that helped to make up for the lack of real taste.

Their nervous waiter returned with several more glasses of beer, which pleased Mahar-Gan, and two plates of leaves that didn't. 'What is this?' he growled, staring at it.

'Salad,' the man answered, shaking a bit. 'Er, what sort of dressing would you like?'

'What I'm wearing,' Mahar-Gan answered. He shoved the plate back. 'Take this muck away and bring me real food. Meat!'

'It will be along shortly,' the man promised. 'Er... could I interest you in hors d'oeuvres?'

'What is he talking about?' the ambassador asked Leela. Leela just shrugged; she had absolutely no idea.

'I'll just get the meat,' the man decided, and hurried away again. Mahar-Gan looked around the room. 'I can see why this feast isn't too well attended,' he said. 'These people don't know how to throw a proper feast.'

Leela was inclined to agree.

Finally, though, the meat did arrive – several plates of it, with interesting roasted vegetables. Mahar-Gan gave a cry of approval, and snatched up a hunk of the meat, biting into it and letting the blood dribble down his beard. 'That's better,' he said through a mouthful. Leela knew from her time with Litefoot that this was considered good manners, so she joined in. The two of them ate with their fingers and their knives.

Mahar-Gan belched loudly several times to show his approval. The other feasters in the place seemed to be as nervous as their server, but nobody said anything, even when Mahar-Gan proposed several toasts.

'More of those bloody intellectuals,' he muttered. 'Thank the Seven Deities I've got you as a companion. At least you're civilized. And not bad-looking, either.'

'Thank you.' Leela was getting quite fond of the ambassador. Here was a real warrior. Leela respected and admired the Doctor, but he didn't behave properly. This was a man who knew the right way to live!

Eventually, even Mahar-Gan was stuffed. He let out one final belch of contentment and regarded their server with a smile. 'You're a funny

man,' he decided. 'But you can throw a good feast.'

'Thank you, I think,' the man replied. His eyes opened as Mahar-Gan peeled off another couple of the local leaf-currency and threw them to him. 'Thank you very much indeed. Is there anything else I can do for you?'

Mahar-Gan looked at Leela, and then sighed. 'A woman would be nice. Where can I find one?'

The man looked at Leela. 'Isn't she your woman?'

'I am my own woman,' Leela said proudly. 'I am a warrior of the Sevateem.'

'Oh, sorry, I'm really not up on the latest gangs,' the man apologized. He turned back to the ambassador. 'I'm not really supposed to...' he looked at the money he'd been given. 'But if you head up to St. Mark's Place, I'm sure you'll find someone who'll be happy to help you.'

'Fine.' Mahar-Gan almost charged out of the eating-place. Leela followed as swiftly as she could. She'd had several glasses of the local beer and was feeling a little buzzed; Mahar-Gan seemed to be utterly unaffected, except that he was now obsessing about getting a woman.

They found the street the man had mentioned easily enough. Leela stared at the small shops curiously, and then gave a triumphant cry, pointing. 'That must be the place,' she decided. Over the door it read: *Religious Sex*. 'They are priestesses of relationships, no doubt.'

'Good.' Mahar-Gan swept down the steps and into the store. 'I'm looking for a good woman!' he roared.

The customers and staff turned to look at him. Some were astonished, others seemed impressed. Leela wasn't surprised. This was actually some sort of a clothing store, she realized. There were racks of the oddest garments she had ever seen. The customers were almost as strange. Many had parts of their bodies pierced, and had placed metal items through ears, noses, eyelids, tongues, belly buttons... Some had their faces painted almost white and others partially black. Their hair was either nonexistent or in strange colours. She had been correct that this was a gathering place for priests and priestesses, it seemed.

One of the women moved to Mahar-Gan, looking him over with interest. 'I'm as good as they get,' she said. 'How good are you?'

Mahar-Gan roared with laughter. 'Wench, you're a scrawny little thing. I would injure you if we grappled.'

'I'm tougher than I look,' she answered. 'If your money is good.'

The ambassador pulled out his roll. 'It is extremely well-behaved,' he informed her.

'I'll say it is,' the girl agreed. She took his arm. 'Why don't you come with me, and we'll see how easily I break...'

Mahar-Gan grinned, and looked back at Leela. 'I shall be back soon,' he promised. 'Or maybe not, if she's stronger than she looks. I shall find you here.'

Leela nodded; there was obviously nothing else for it. It was her duty to see that he enjoyed his stay, and he was clearly about to enjoy something.

Once the couple had left, the store returned to something like normal.

One woman came over to Leela, and fingered her leathers. 'Nice threads,' she said. 'Did you buy them here?'

'No,' Leela answered. 'I made them myself. I killed and skinned the beasts also.'

'No need to be sarcastic,' the woman sniffed. Leela didn't understand, but decided she needed a little fresh air. She went out of the shop and back onto the street. Most of the stores contained items she didn't understand, but there were more food stores. She'd eaten more than she needed, so they didn't appeal. There were more places to drink, but she knew when to stop. Instead, she simply walked about, looking at the strange sights, and waiting for the return of Mahar-Gan.

It was about an hour later that she heard his unmistakable bull roar, even over the traffic noises. He sounded annoyed, so she hurried back to the shop where they had split up, and winced at what she saw.

There were six men surrounding him, all of them armed. The girl he had gone with was on the steps of the shop, looking pale but happy. Her clothing was even skimpier than before.

'Hand over the roll, man, and we won't hurt you,' one of the men said. He had a long knife in his hand.

'Hurt me?' Mahar-Gan laughed. 'Just try to, child!' He had his own, longer knife out.

Leela understood immediately what was happening. These were robbers, who were after Mahar-Gan's leaves. Leela considered her Janis thorns, but remembered how the Doctor disliked her using them. Regretfully, she pulled her own knife instead, and sprang to the ambassador's side.

'We are two to your six,' she said firmly. 'It would not be a fair fight. You should retreat.'

'Retreat?' The robber laughed. 'Lady, you're as crazy as he is. And I hope just as rich.' He nodded to a man standing beside him. That man pulled out a gun.

Leela scowled. She had seen these before, and knew that these men clearly were not aiming on fighting honourably. They threw tiny pieces of metal with great force that could cause grievous bodily injury. She reacted instantly, lashing out with her blade, and spearing the man's hand. He screamed and dropped the gun.

'You bitch!' another snarled, and then the men all lunged forward. Mahar-Gan gave a roar of delight and plunged into the fight. There was the sound of snapping bones followed by screams. One man tried to drop-kick the ambassador, only to be snatched by the ankle, whirled and thrown. Leela took on two of the men, dancing about and disarming them with ridiculous ease. Neither would have survived a day in her home forest. Then she knocked them out with as much gentleness as she could.

Mahar-Gan wasn't bothered by any compassion. He'd broken the arms of two of his attackers, and probably the jaw of the third. The man Leela had wounded was on the ground, bleeding and screaming. 'Oh, shut up,' the ambassador snarled, and punched the man. He collapsed, insensate. Mahar-Gan looked around. 'Is that all?' he asked, sounding disappointed.

'You're some man,' the dazed girl breathed.

'You're stronger than you look,' the barbarian roared, approvingly. He swept her up for a final kiss.

'But now I must be off.' He glanced at Leela. 'We should return to the Doctor now.'

Leela looked at the litter of broken bodies. 'Yes,' she agreed. She had done nothing wrong, but if anything else happened the Doctor might get annoyed. He was funny like that. She looked to the girl. 'You will see to it that these men are dealt with?'

'I'll square the cops,' the woman agreed.

Leela had no idea at all what that meant, but she wasn't going to show her ignorance. 'Good.' To Mahar-Gan, she added: 'Come.'

Even in this strange city, her instincts were good. She led the way back to 40 Bleeker Street without a hitch. The house was still quiet when they returned, and K9 was on guard.

'Is the Doctor still meditating?' she asked.

'Yes,' K9 replied. 'I estimate another seven point eight minutes, mistress.'

'Good.' Mahar-Gan put what was left of the leaves back in the tray by the door, and then clapped Leela heartily on both shoulders. 'You have done well,' he said approvingly. 'I have had a good treaty, a good feast, a good drink, a good woman and a good fight, all in one evening. Rarely have I negotiated so well. Maybe I should break the treaty.'

'Break it?' Leela was confused. 'Why would you do that?'

'So I could have all of this fun over again.' Mahar-Gan laughed as he went looking for the toilet.

Leela looked warily down at K9. 'He is joking, isn't he?' she asked, worried. If the treaty was broken, the Doctor would definitely have strong words with her.

'Human humour is not something I comprehend,' K9 answered unhelpfully. 'I cannot tell whether the ambassador is being amusing.'

Oh dear... Leela winced. She could only pray that she hadn't made a mistake after all. But Mahar-Gan had seemed to be very pleased. It had probably just been a joke.

Probably...

GRAEME NEIL REID

The Silent City

Jonathan Morris

As the music dies away, we fade up from blackness and find ourselves overlooking a beautiful woodland. Or, at least, an image of one. It is high summer; the oaks are covered in a heavy layer of leaves, the grass is lush, and the sun is burning in a dear sky. The trees form a crescent around a grove at the rise of the hill, where a path leads past an unoccupied park bench. It is a perfect, tranquil scene, but nevertheless there is a sense of something eerie and extraordinary. Perhaps it is the silence. The scene is so still, and so quiet, it is like a wake.

The peace is broken by a distorted trumpeting. A small wooden building ghosts into existence in an unobtrusive corner of the glade, its battered paintwork half-hidden in the shadows. For some seconds, we cast our gaze over the panelling, rising up past the frosted windows to read the lettering above the double doors. 'Police Public Call Box'.

Caption:
THE SILENT CITY

The trumpeting halts with an abrupt crump, and we are returned to the sheer silence.

Caption:
BY JONATHAN MORRIS

For a few more seconds, we watch the police box as it stands, expectant and mournful. And then the caption disappears and we fade back to darkness.

After a refreshing night's sleep, a wash and a shave, Steven strolled

into the console room, closing the door to the living quarters behind him. He stifled a yawn, and tugged the neck of his sweater into place, before stretching his arms to wake himself up.

The room was unusually gloomy, the roundels of the walls barely visible in the shadows. The only illumination came from within the glass column at the centre of the six-sided console, where the Doctor stood hunched over the controls, the light picking out his deeply lined forehead and pursed lips, his silvery hair swept back in an imperious curl. He tutted merrily to himself as he adjusted various levers and switches, oblivious to anything but the dials before him. Steven studied the Doctor's reflection through the column; his features stretched and grew, changing the familiar, kindly-faced old man into something distorted and alien.

The central column lay at rest, indicating that the TARDIS had materialised. Steven rubbed his jaw, still tender to the touch. 'Where are we this time, Doctor?'

Vicki, the Doctor's other companion, put one finger to her lips and shushed him. She sat perched in the wing-backed armchair, her knees tucked up against her chest. She wore a formless grey jumper decorated with geometric designs and plain trousers. She gave Steven a confidential don't-disturb-him smirk and nodded towards the Doctor.

'I was only asking –' said Steven.

'The Doctor's busy.' Vicki raised her eyebrows reprovingly.

The Doctor gave a chuckle, and cleared his throat. He looked up from the controls. 'Ah. Steven, my boy. Glad you could join us.' He took a step back and clasped his hands together. 'We have arrived, it would seem. Yes, we have arrived.'

'But where?' Steven joined the Doctor at the console, and Vicki clambered out of the chair and stood to one side.

'We shall soon see,' said the Doctor, twisting the scanner control. The television screen fixed high up the far wall flared into life.

The image on the screen sharpened from a blur of grey and black to reveal the leaves and branches of a woodland glade. As the scanner panned to the right, more trees and bushes moved into view in a leisurely procession. There were no signs of life; no birds, no forest animals. There was no movement at all.

'It's so peaceful,' sighed Vicki dreamily.

'It looks like we're still on Earth,' said Steven. 'Doctor?'

'It would appear to be so.' The Doctor rubbed his fingers together. 'Yes, yes. Certainly, all of the astral and atmospheric readings indicate that we are on the Earth.' He smiled. 'The ship seems to becoming rather fond of the place, hmm?'

'Can we go outside?' said Vicki, her eyes never leaving the screen. 'Oh, can we?'

The Doctor patted her shoulder. 'I don't see why not, my dear.'

'Are you sure it's safe?' said Steven warily. The Doctor had a habit of landing them in places that initially seemed welcoming but that invariably turned out to be hostile. Only recently, had found themselves in the dank forests of medieval England being chased by mead-soaked Vikings. And a visit to Venice had ended with them embroiled in a plot involving stick-like aliens and a spy by the name of William Shakespeare. Experience had given Steven good reason to be cautious.

'Safe? Mmm?' The Doctor fastened his black cape and rounded on Steven. 'Of course it is safe.' He laughed to himself. 'You would do well not to doubt my abilities! A little optimism goes a long way you know!'

'Do you think we might be in the late twentieth century?' gushed Vicki. Born more than a century and a half earlier thus Steven, she had been travelling with the Doctor for several months, and regarded him with the bright, unswerving faith of am innocent teenager. 'We could go and visit Ian and Barbara!'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I'm afraid it is unlikely, my dear. The chances that we have arrived at the right time, in the correct continent, are extremely remote.'

'But still –'

'No. It is better you have realistic expectations.' The Doctor pressed the switch that activated the door mechanism. 'A little optimism, Steven. But not, perhaps, too much.'

Steven laughed and joined Vicki at the exterior doors. With a hum, the double doors drew apart. Outside was a gloriously sunny day and the smell of rich, wet grass. The sight was inviting. Vicki rushed eagerly out of the starkness of the TARDIS console room and into the leafy

glade.

Steven was about to follow her when an impatient tapping sound caught his attention. He turned to see the Doctor stooped over the Ormolu clock, his face set in concentration. The Doctor rapped the minute hand of the clock with an index finger. With no result, he studied the antiquated clock face intently, numeral by numeral. 'Doctor?'

Startled, the Doctor looked up. 'Ah. Steven.'

'What is it?'

'Oh, nothing. Nothing,' said the Doctor, dismissing the matter with a wave of a hand. 'It probably just needs winding, that's all. Yes, that's it.' He led Steven back to the doors. 'Let's see where Vicki's got to, shall we? Hmm?'

The bright sunlight warmed Vicki's upturned face. She circled slowly around the woodland clearing, her shoes sinking into the soft grass, and took a lungful of fresh air. After the sterile atmosphere of the TARDIS, emerging into the real world felt like waking up. Vicki closed her eyes and smiled.

She turned to see the Doctor and Steven emerging from the police box, the Doctor harrumphing as he locked the doors. As he stepped out of the shadows, he appraised their surroundings and nodded stiffly in approval.

'Well, it looks like Earth,' said Steven dubiously.

'It smells like it, too,' said Vicki as she walked over to join them. 'It's lovely.'

'Where exactly do you think we might be, Doctor?' said Steven. 'Or when?'

Vicki giggled. 'As if the Doctor would know!'

The Doctor shot her a look of mock indignation. 'My child, it is perfectly possible to deduce our location with a little reasoning intelligence and patience.'

Steven scanned the surrounding trees for some clue, but the trees were as silent and motionless as a painted backdrop. He shrugged an unimpressed shrug. 'A forest, by the look of it.' He strolled away from the TARDIS, his boots trudging into the sodden earth. 'There's some sort of path.'

Shielding her eyes, Vicki cast her gaze around the treetops, gave a gasp. 'Over there.' She pointed, arm outstretched. 'Look, Doctor, Steven; over those trees. In the distance. A church tower.'

The Doctor peered. 'Yes, yes. And some other buildings. Well, that would seem to confirm it. We are on Earth. But –'

'But when?' pressed Steven.

'Five minutes to twelve o'clock', giggled Vicki. 'You can see clock on the tower. There.'

Steven joined her and followed her pointing finger. 'Where? I see. Eleven fifty-five.' He squinted. 'It's made of stone. You haven't landed us in the Middle Ages again, have you, Doc?'

'No. Just because the building dates from the middle ages, it doesn't mean that is necessarily where– when we are. You see, that building could have been standing for centuries. It's not new, is it? Silly boy. Hmm. But –' The Doctor's fingers twitched at his lapels in irritation. 'But there is something strange. Have you noticed it, I wonder?'

Steven regarded him. 'Something strange?'

'I haven't spotted anything,' said Vicki brightly. 'It seems perfectly normal.'

'No?' The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'Look around you. Listen. Something out of the ordinary?'

Steven gave Vicki a look of incredulity, and then, hands on hips, looked around intently for any signs of life. Vicki held her breath and listened, but there was nothing to hear. It was absolutely silent. No rustle of leaves, nothing.

'Of course –' began Vicki. She put a hand to her cheek. Outdoors, there would normally be a breeze gently ruffling the bushes and the grass. But the air was utterly calm, unnervingly so. Apart from their own voices and footsteps, there hadn't been a sound since they had stepped out of the TARDIS. And nothing was moving; it was like standing inside a photograph. Forever trapped in a lifeless, soundless world, thought Vicki. Utterly alone. She shivered, feeling a sudden sense of claustrophobia. The silence seemed so intense, so suffocating.

'What is it?' said Steven, breaking the spell. 'I can't hear anything.'

'Exactly,' announced Vicki. 'That's because there isn't anything to

hear. It's completely quiet.'

Steven's mouth opened in realisation. 'You're right. There hasn't been a single sound. And nothing's moving; the leaves on the trees, nothing. There's no breeze at all. Doctor?'

The Doctor stroked his chin. 'This is most interesting, isn't it?' He adopted a poetic frown. 'No noise, no wind. Most curious, yes.'

'No birdsong, either,' said Steven, looking up into the empty sky. 'No birds. It's as quiet as the grave.'

'You don't think –' stammered Vicki. 'You don't think we've skipped a time track again?' She remembered with dread their visit to Xeros, where, due to a TARDIS malfunction, they had arrived as ghosts cast into their own future.

'That was my thought, but I don't think so,' said the Doctor. He waved a hand, indicating the grass and mud. 'We have left footprints, you see. No, we are most definitely real.'

'Then – then what is it?' said Steven.

'I don't know, I don't know,' said the Doctor. 'Perhaps–' He stopped himself mid-thought and shook his head. 'No. I think we should investigate further. Now, if we follow this course, we should end up in that settlement. I think that is the best path of action.'

'But –' began Vicki, a question on her lips.

'Later, later,' said the Doctor, starting briskly down the path. He gave a sprightly giggle. 'Do keep up!'

Steven and Vicki exchanged bemused expressions, and followed.

The path wound a short distance through the wood and escaped onto the crest of a grassy hill. From this point they overlooked an expanse of parkland rolling away a mile or so below them. The trees extended to either side, thinning out to reveal hints of civilisation; the angular shapes of slated roofs, an occasional window, and, most conspicuously of all, the aerials mounted onto each of the chimney stacks. The aerials, Steven deduced, indicated they had arrived at some point during the twentieth century, in that brief period when communications were sophisticated enough to use radio but not sophisticated enough to do it unobtrusively.

At first Steven had assumed they were on the outskirts of a village,

but as they reached the apex of the hill he realised that they were on the fringes of a vast city. In the far distance, spaced irregularly along the horizon, shining in the brilliant, burning sunlight, were a half-recognisable mixture of buildings. It had been several years since Steven had left Earth, and the skyline would clutter dramatically over the next six centuries, but nevertheless the view felt familiar and reassuring. Over to the far left, there was the domed cathedral; nearer, there was a solitary tower, a squat cylinder resting on a spire; and, to the right, the four chimneys of the power station. The view seemed strangely bare and antiquated; the last time Steven had visited the city, those monuments had been dwarfed by the geodesic cloudscrapers and spiralling monorails.

Vicki bounded excitedly to Steven's side and took in the panorama with breathless delight. 'Oh, Steven, I know where we are!' she exclaimed. 'That's old London. I remember seeing it in a history programme. Ooh, hasn't it changed?'

'Changed?' said Steven.

Well, last time I was here it was all moving walkways,' said Vicki proudly. 'And space cars.'

'Really?' Steven fought the urge to smile. He was tempted to tell her that moving walkways and space cars were, to him, also the stuff of history programmes. But, for all his cynicism, he couldn't bring himself to do it. He found her endless enthusiasm endearing and he knew that, despite her bright disposition, she had, like him, endured more than her share of hardship. They had both been survivors of spaceship crashes, given up for lost, and had both suffered the loneliness of months of captivity before being rescued by the kindly, enigmatic and occasionally infuriating old man known only as the Doctor. Steven couldn't help but be touched by Vicki's almost childlike faith in the Doctor, and yet, as they travelled together, and the memories of his own ordeal faded, he found that he was beginning to share in her admiration for the old man. He knew, with complete certainty, that he could trust the Doctor more than he could trust anything else in life.

A wheezing and coughing heralded the arrival of the Doctor in his shirtsleeves, his cloak slung over one shoulder. Spotting a park bench, he eased himself into it with a grateful sigh.

'Doctor!' cried Vicki, 'You should take it more easy at your age.'

'At my age?' The Doctor dabbed at his forehead with an indignant handkerchief 'Just because I don't canter about like a billy goat, it doesn't mean I am an invalid, you know.' He sucked in a breath. 'It is, I feel, uncommonly humid. Very hot. Now. Now where are we? Hmm?'

'Old London,' said Vicki. 'See?'

Remaining seated, the Doctor inspected the buildings on the horizon with academic amusement. 'Ah, yes. Old London? I don't think Miss Wright and Chesterton would care for you to call it that.'

'I know, but–' Vicki stopped as something caught her eye. She pointed an excited finger. 'Look. There's some people down there.'

The Doctor and Steven followed her gaze. 'So we're not alone,' muttered Steven to himself. About a hundred yards away, there were four figures, all dressed in summer clothes. Two men and two women, facing towards each other in an approximate square.

'No, it would seem not, my boy. Perhaps you might try attracting their attention.' The Doctor fluttered his handkerchief by way of an example.

Griming, Vicki stood tip-toes and waved. 'Hello,' she called, cupping her hands around her mouth. 'Hello!'

'Hello!' shouted Steven stiffly. 'Over here–!' As the last syllable left his lips, he suddenly paused. In this silence, there should have been some echo but instead his words seemed to become muted in the air. The atmosphere was utterly dead. And there was no response. The four figures didn't turn their heads or show any reaction to the commotion.

'Maybe they can't hear us,' suggested Vicki.

'No, they should have been able to,' said Steven. He frowned. This latest development unnerved him. There was something eerie and unreal about this place; it was like walking through a half-waking dream. Perhaps they hadn't been brought to the Earth at all. 'It doesn't make sense.'

'You think they're ignoring us? Maybe they're all deaf?' said Vicki.

'Must you always jump to the least likely explanation, my dear?' uttered the Doctor. 'Ignoring us! Preposterous!'

'So what do you think it is?' said Steven.

'I'm not sure.' The Doctor patted the park bench and narrowed his eyes. 'Perhaps we are not making any sound? Or maybe this atmosphere — this atmosphere doesn't carry sound? Sound travels at different speeds according to the medium, you know.'

'But –' protested Steven.

'Ah-ha!' Forgetting their conversation, the Doctor reached down, and retrieved a discarded newspaper from underneath the bench. 'Now, this should provide some clue.' The paper had been slightly crumpled but the print was fresh and clear. 'Let us see. Yes. The date! Today is the thirty-first of July, nineteen sixty-five.'

'Nineteen sixty-five?' said Steven. He had guessed as much, though the thought of visiting so ancient an era still left him disorientated.

'So we can go and visit Ian and Barbara!' clapped Vicki. 'Oh, can we?'

'I wouldn't be so certain.' The Doctor pulled himself to his feet. 'We would have a strange time, if we were to visit them, and they couldn't hear us, hmmm? No, no, there is something very odd happening here. And I won't be satisfied until I've got to the bottom of it.'

Steven approached him. 'What do you propose we do next?'

'I think our next step should be to go and see those people down there. Perhaps, in a closer vicinity, we may be able to communicate? Or maybe we shall find an answer to the explanation.'

'After you,' said Steven, indicating the downward path to the Doctor.

'But I don't understand,' gasped Vicki. 'What's happened?'

At the bottom of the hill, the trees and bushes were more sparse and the grass had worn away to a dustbowl of gravel. The edge of the park thinned into scrubland, separated from the pavement by a low beam fence. Beyond the pavement the road tarmac baked lazily in the late morning sunshine. Several cars rested at intervals down the road, a dozen or so yards apart. The cars were rounded and made of dull metal; some also sported a wooden border around the doors and windows.

Inside each car, seated in the driver's seat, was the shadow form of a person. It was hard to make out their features through the reflected windscreen glare, but they seemed to be fairly normal, wearing suits

and headscarves. Except none of them was moving. They were sitting, their eyes fixed on the road ahead, their features set, motionless.

'Are they all parked?' asked Vicki.

'No, Vicki,' said Steven. 'I don't know much about the twentieth century, but I don't think they had a habit of parking in the middle of the road.'

'Then what–?'

'Shush, my dear.' The Doctor beadily inspected the cars, his hands perched eagle-like on his lapels. 'If you will observe, you can see the petrol fumes coming from the car exhausts.'

The Doctor was right. Out of the exhaust tubes of each car, there was a similar cloud of black smoke. But the odd thing was, the smoke was also perfectly still, hanging in the air like a half-coiled mist.

'But the fumes,' said Steven. 'They're not moving either.'

'Exactly, exactly.' The Doctor chuckled. 'And yet a gas – it does not match the behaviour we would expect. It doesn't float away, it remains where it is. Hmmm.'

'And the people. They're just sitting there,' said Vicki fearfully.

'Are they? They look like they're driving to me,' said Doctor.

'But they're not going anywhere,' Vicki replied.

'No, they're not, are they? This is most odd.' The Doctor rubbed his brow. 'No sound, and no motion.'

'Any ideas, Doctor?' said Steven.

'I have a theory, yes, and I would like to put it to the test. Those people we waved to earlier. Where are they?'

Vicki led the Doctor away from the fence and nodded towards the four figures, who were standing only a short distance away. They hadn't moved from their earlier position; they were still arranged in a square, facing each other. 'There.'

'Oh yes,' huffed the Doctor. He jutted out his chin and strode towards them.

'Careful, Doctor!' warned Steven.

The Doctor walked right up to one of the figures. A man in his twenties, with light hair, a cotton shirt and flannel trousers. The man was looking away from the Doctor, as though something had caught his attention.

His fist to his mouth, the Doctor coughed. And coughed again. 'Excuse me, hmmm?' he called. The young man remained motionless. The Doctor tapped him on his elbow, but there was still no reaction. The Doctor patted him, and, receiving no response, circled around him. Once they were face to face, the Doctor peered into his pale eyes and then snorted victoriously.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor said. 'It's quite safe. Vicki, Steven–?'

Steven and Vicki approached the four figures. As they drew closer, Steven noticed that although they were standing still, they were not actually upright. Each of them leaned either forwards or to one side, balanced on one leg, as if they were frozen mid-way through a movement. The two men and women were each holding unfamiliar wooden implements consisting of a handle and a near-circle of gridded twine.

Vicki watched them, wide-eyed. 'How can they balance?' she said. 'Standing in one leg?' She giggled at the thought.

Steven turned to each of the figures in turn. Their faces were also fixed in their expressions, their mouths open, their eyes unblinking. This close, the resemblance to statues was astonishing…

'That is an interesting question,' said the Doctor, placing a comforting arm around Vicki's shoulders. 'Why don't they fall over, hmm?'

'Well, Doctor?' said Steven impatiently. Unprompted, the Doctor would never think of sharing his explanations, and would be content simply to off away, muttering and giggling to himself.

'It appears –' He paused. 'It appears that the laws of gravity and momentum have been suspended. That fellow there' — he wagged a finger — 'he could not possibly balance like that. If you look, there, he is in the process of stepping forward. But, as we see him, he is achieving the impossible. Most peculiar.'

Vicki gaped as the sight before her triggered a memory. 'Of course! They're playing tennis!'

'Tennis?' said Steven.

'An old Earth game,' said Vicki. 'Played with rackets, and a ball.'

'A ball?' Steven scanned the nearby ground, but found no sign of a ball. Lifting his head, he spotted it. It hung in mid-air between the four

players, some two yards off the ground. There was nothing to support it; it was, as far as Steven could see, defying gravity.

The Doctor had also seen it. 'Ah, yes. I'm rather afraid that proves my theory. You see time– my boy! What are you doing!'

Steven turned guiltily to the Doctor. He had reached up for ball and, as though it was the most natural thing to do, collected it from its position at head height. He felt its surface, and weighed it in his palm. The tennis ball felt furry and light, not light enough to float. To make sure, Steven held it in front of him, and let go. The ball sank into the grass.

The Doctor barked in disapproval. 'You shouldn't touch! Don't move anything!'

'But why not?' said Steven, crouching to pick up the ball.

'Don't you see? They were playing tennis with that. You can't put it back where you found it, can you?'

Feeling slightly ridiculous, Steven tried to return to the ball to mid-air. Predictably, the ball fell, and he clutched it before it hit the ground.

'There!' said the Doctor. 'You see, what has happened is these people — perhaps the whole world — have been frozen in time.'

'Frozen in time?' said Vicki uncomprehendingly.

'Time, the fourth dimension, my dear. It is a dimension like any other. Normally you move along it, one second after another, if it is possibly to move along something, it is also possible to stop at a single point.' He put a finger to his lips.

'You mean, like a freeze-frame?' said Steven.

'Precisely! What we are seeing is a single moment in time.'

Vicki looked scared. 'It's horrible. It's like looking at a photograph. All these people, stuck in one moment.'

'Indeed,' agreed the Doctor. 'For us, time has come to a halt. But as far as these good people are concerned, they are in the middle of a game of tennis. Now do you see what you have done, Steven?'

Steven nodded. 'They're going to wonder where their ball's got to.' He tossed the ball a couple more times, and then placed it at the feet of one of the figures.

'Fortunately, it is not serious,' said the Doctor. 'But we shall have to be most careful. We must not move anything. Who knows what the

consequences might be?'

'So wait a minute,' said Steven. 'What you're saying is, that we are stuck at a single point in time?'

'Yes. Time has stopped. All this time we have been here, it has only been a single instant.'

'That explains why no-one could hear us!' said Vicki. 'And why there was no noise!'

'Exactly — because there was no time for the noise to be in. Every sound, no matter how short, requires a certain amount of time to be heard. But in an instant — utter silence!'

'And so you're saying we've only been here, for — what?' said Steven.

'No time at all,' answered Vicki.

Steven shook his head in disbelief 'But that's ridiculous!'

The Doctor walked to one side, facing away from them. 'Not at all. The question is, though, why has this happened? Why is time standing still for everyone else, and yet we are unaffected? Hmm?'

'The ship?' suggested Steven. 'A malfunction with the TARDIS?'

'A possibility, a possibility. But I think not. A malfunction with the TARDIS would affect us, yes, but not the whole planet. No, I think there is some other reason.' The Doctor stared keenly into the distance. 'And the answer is out there, somewhere. Why are we still able to move about when the rest of the world is trapped - like an insect caught in amber?'

We move in on the Doctor's face, his lips tightly set, his eyes wide with indignant curiosity. Then, holding the image, we fade to blackness.

We fade up to reveal an image of London; a busy high street, with bustling pedestrians and double-decker buses and cars. But the image is frozen, like a photograph. We pan across the image, past the shops and the pedestrians struggling with their baskets and bags.

There is an unsettling, alien atmosphere. We hear distorted music, an electronic throbbing punctuated by rhythmic, metallic clangs.

The image fades to be replaced by another view of London; the

exit of Covent Garden underground station. There are dozens of people walking through the entrance, their faces fixed in a variety of expressions; joy, boredom, exhaustion.

Another view. A picture of a couple, running through the street, hand in hand, their faces filled with laughter. An unmoving dog bounds happily along beside them.

Another view. Trafalgar Square. Something has disturbed the pigeons, and they are fixed in position as they flurry past in a blur of wings.

We fade up again to reveal one side of the city street. In the background is a newsagents; its windows are full of posters advertising magazines and competitions. In the foreground is the pavement, where two figures are passing; an elderly man in a cap and grey coat carrying a newspaper and a woman in her thirties, pushing a pram. They both resemble waxworks, or cut-outs.

Vicki skipped up to the newsagents and peered through the window, waiting for the Doctor and Steven to catch up. It had been a surreal journey through the silent city, winding their way between the frozen people as they went obliviously about their business. Men hailed taxis that would never arrive. Mouths were open, caught in conversation. Passing a cafe, they had seen people eating, a sandwich or cup of coffee paused on their lips. Strangest of all, there had been the window-cleaner propped at the top of a ladder, the foamy water spilling out of his bucket and forming a sheet of glass in mid-air. Vicki had been tempted to touch the water, but the Doctor had warned her away. It was, he had sternly explained, vitally important that nothing be disturbed.

At the sound of her companions' footsteps, Vicki turned. 'It's funny, all these people staying still.' She smiled. 'We could look in their bags without them noticing.'

The Doctor leaned forward in disapproval. 'And what if time starts moving forward again? What if things return to normal? Where would you be then? A pretty predicament!'

'You think that might happen?' said Steven.

'Who knows?' The Doctor rocked on his heels. 'And they discover Vicki, her hand in their bags? You would have some explaining to do then, my child! No, you mustn't touch or move anything, I have told you.'

Vicki puzzled for a few seconds. 'But if time did start moving — they can't see us walking about, can they?'

'No, of course not –'

'So we would suddenly appear out of nowhere!' Vicki giggled at the thought of the astonishment on their faces. 'They wouldn't know where we'd come from!' She paused. 'Assuming time does start moving again.'

'Yes, quite. Quite.' The Doctor's eyes shifted cagily over the immediate area. The street continued a short way ahead of them, past a pillar box and a narrow alley. And beyond that–

Vicki followed his gaze and gave a yelp of fright. 'Look!'

On the edge of the pavement was a woman in her twenties, wearing a neat dress and heels, caught in the act of toppling backwards into the road, Her face was a picture of astonishment and alarm. The papers and books she was carrying in her hands were strewn and piled in the air around her, as though they were a flock of birds attacking her.

A suited man of a similar age gripped her by the lapels, his face twisted in a rictus of anger, his teeth bared, his lips glistening. He was pushing her into the road. Into the path of an approaching car.

The car's driver, an elderly lady, had obviously spotted the confrontation. Her jaw had dropped, her eyes startled. She was twisting the steering wheel, attempting in vain to swerve the vehicle away from the falling woman. But there were only three feet to separate them. It was obviously too late. The car was going to hit.

Vicki rushed up to them, Steven and the Doctor on her heels. 'She — she's going to be killed!' exclaimed Vicki.

The Doctor observed the situation with detachment. 'Now, remember what I said. We must not interfere.'

'But if we don't –'

'Listen to me,' snapped the Doctor. 'There is nothing we can do to prevent this incident.'

Steven took his place beside Vicki. 'But Doctor, surely in this case –'

'No, we mustn't do anything.' The Doctor narrowed his eyes. 'It appears that this gentleman is pushing this young woman into the path of that vehicle, yes. But how can we be sure?'

'What do you mean?' said Steven.

'Look, he is holding onto her.' The Doctor waggled a finger, indicating where the man had grasped the woman's coat. 'Perhaps he is pulling her out of the way of the oncoming car? Perhaps, hmm, he is saving her life?'

Vicki looked closer. What she had taken for anger in the man's face could have been anxiety. The sinews on his arms were bulging. The Doctor could be right — maybe the man was heaving the woman towards him, rather than thrusting her out into the road. It was impossible to tell.

'You might be right,' Vicki admitted. 'But shouldn't we try to do something anyway?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'I'm sorry, but we hold a responsibility. If we were not here, if time hadn't be stopped, it would be too late anyway. And the more we interfere, we cannot be sure we are doing the correct thing. We may even be preventing time from moving again, yes.'

Vicki drew away from the struggling figures and bowed her apologetically. 'I suppose you're right, Doctor.'

'That is very wise of you, my dear.' The Doctor rubbed his fingers. 'Now. There doesn't seem to be anything more to see here, so perhaps we should return to the ship?'

'No, wait a minute, Doctor –' said Steven, looking over their heads in sudden astonishment. 'Look, up there.'

'What is it my now, boy, what is it?' flustered the Doctor as he turned around and lifted his gaze. 'Oh, my word –'

A fog of smoke was curling away above them, rising from behind the chimney tops and then dissipating into the pale sky. 'A fire?' said Vicki. don't see –'

'But look, Vicki — the smoke — it's moving,' breathed Steven.

Vicki looked again. The plume rose and unravelled as it ascended into the windless air, past the stationary birds and clouds. In a world where everything was still, it was the first movement they had seen.

'You are quite right,' said the Doctor. 'Fascinating!' He checked the street, but everything remained motionless. 'Perhaps time has not stopped everywhere, as we thought? This may provide some clue. I think we should investigate.'

'It seems to be coming from those buildings over there,' said Steven. 'It can't be more than a couple of streets away.'

'Then come on, come on!' ushered the Doctor eagerly. 'We have no time to lose!' Beckoning them after him, he started down the side street in the direction of the smoke.

'I don't believe it,' muttered Steven, shaking his head.

High brick buildings enclosed the small square on every side, each presenting a brace of shop windows. At the centre of the square was a garden enclosed in railings, consisting of a bench, a lawn, and a flowerbed. In the far corner, the fence had been flattened by a crashed space craft.

The craft appeared to be constructed out of a dull, grey metal; it had originally had a sleek, cylindrical structure, but much of its surface had been buckled out of shape when it had impacted into the ground. Sections of the side had fallen away to reveal pipes and cables; other parts of the object had been smudged by trails of smoke and pockmarked by meteor impacts. The large radar dish fixed to its roof was broken. A hatch was set mid-way along one side, and at the rear were a set of conical exhaust pipes. The engines formed the source of the cloud, the thick, fuming gas pouring out of the ruptured fuel tubes.

'It's a space ship,' said Steven, walking towards it. But it was a space ship unlike any he had seen. It was so small for a start; there would only be room for two or three astronauts inside. The design of the engines was also unfamiliar, and the markings along one side of the ship were written in incomprehensible alien symbols.

'Fascinating, fascinating,' said the Doctor gleefully as he crouched down for a closer inspection.

Vicki was bewildered. 'But what's a space ship doing here, in the middle of London?'

'Well, Vicki, it looks like it's crashed,' said Steven. The front of the craft had buried itself into the flowerbed, ploughing up much of the

garden and piling it into the opposite end of the square.

'I can see that,' Vicki said. 'I meant, what is it doing here at all?'

'I don't know. Doctor?'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'I'm not sure. I should imagine it has something to do with the effect in time we have observed. Its arrival has gone unnoticed, do you see? If time was not standing still, there would be lots of people running around. Fire engines and policemen, I shouldn't wonder. No, I think the two things are connected.' Patting his knees, he pulled himself upright. 'What do you make of it, Steven, my boy?'

'I've never seen anything like it.' Following the Doctor's lead, Steven approached the craft. Although the engines were smoking, the ship itself didn't seem to be producing any heat. But, thought Steven, any ship entering the Earth's atmosphere would become hot through the air friction. And, for a crash landing, it was in remarkably good condition.

'Do you think it belongs to aliens?' asked Vicki.

'Yes, well, we won't get very far by just asking a lot of questions, will we?' clucked the Doctor impatiently. He extended a finger and lightly tapped the side of the craft.

'Are you sure it's safe?' said Steven as the Doctor wended his way towards the hatchway. 'What if there's someone inside?'

'I shall expect they will be very pleased to see us!' said the Doctor. The entry hatch worked on a simple lever operated system. The Doctor grasped the control bar and swung it to the left. The hatch swung open with a yawning creak. The Doctor watched it with the expectant pride of a stage magician.

Steven joined the Doctor. To his relief, the inside of the craft was unoccupied. The cockpit was gloomy and cramped, consisting of a control panel filled with a variety of switches and dials and two padded seats. The seats, Steven noted, were intended for human occupants, and made from a type of plastic. Apart from the controls, the cabin was bare and functional, with no ornamentation or colour of any kind.

Without hesitation, the Doctor climbed into the cockpit, the low ceiling forcing him to stoop. Steven squeezed himself in after him, his shoulders pressed against the walls, the floor creaking beneath them. The air inside craft smelt metallic and acrid, like old batteries.

'There's no-one at home,' Steven observed. 'No pilot.'

The Doctor inspected the control panel. 'No. No, I wonder where they've got to? Hmm?' He turned to Vicki, who was about clamber on board. 'Ah. I think you had better wait outside, my dear. There isn't room for three of us in here.'

Vicki pulled a face and moved away. 'Oh, if you say so.'

'What do you think, Doctor?' said Steven, moving awkwardly down the cabin.

'Well, this is all very sophisticated. Very sophisticated indeed. Whoever built this ship was certainly most advanced.' The Doctor directed his attention back to the controls, and then twisted himself around to examine the rear of the cabin. 'Ah. Now let's see.' He crouched down in front of a bank of instruments. A row of warning lights.

Steven moved next to the Doctor. 'What is it?'

'This is most curious. These instruments here refer to the motors of the craft.'

'The engines?'

'Yes. It seems they are based on a form of energy radiation.' He gave a start and pointed to one of the dials. It jittered in the red 'Danger' section. 'Oh my goodness. It would appear that the engines are about to explode!'

'Explode?'

'Yes, my boy, explode. In a little over five minutes' time.'

Steven stared at the dial. 'Wh– What–?'

The Doctor stroked his chin, considering for some seconds. He leaned forward confidentially. 'There will be a massive explosion, destroying the whole of London.'

'You mean this space craft it's going to blow up?'

'Yes!' proclaimed the Doctor. He ran a wry finger over the dials. 'There is some damage, but I think it can be repaired. Yes, someone with my expertise–'

'But if we only have five minutes left,' Steven reminded him.

'Have you forgotten, my boy?' The Doctor turned to face him and chuckled. 'Time has come to a halt! We have all the time in the world!'

Her hands behind her back, Vicki turned away from the space craft and made her way around the gardens. It was typical; she was always the one who had to wait outside until her elders had satisfied themselves it was safe. The Doctor and Steven treated her like a child, always bossing her about and deciding what was best. Well, not this time, she thought.

She watched the smoke rising overhead, and then, bored, she looked around the surrounding shop windows. So this was Barbara and Ian's time. It all seemed so unsophisticated. Life must be so much hard work. Imagine having to go out to buy food, rather than just turning a sequence of dials on a food machine. Imagine having to walk everywhere, rather than letting the pavement carry you. And those cars looked so dangerous, relying only on the reactions of the driver. In her time, the space cars were operated by remote control and had special anti- magnetic cushions to prevent collision.

But that time was so very far away, and Vicki had learned that although her era was very high-tech and conventional, compared to earlier periods in Earth's history it was rather, well, pedestrian.

For an absent-minded moment, she dismissed the sudden motion she glimpsed out of the corner of her eye. Then, remembering, she looked again. A shadowy figure in one of the alleys flitted and then vanished. There was someone down there; someone had been approaching the craft and then, after spotting her, they had suddenly darted away again.

'Doctor! Steven!' whispered Vicki as loudly as she dared. But they couldn't hear her. She considered knocking on the hatch to alert the Doctor and Steven, and then decided against it. No, whilst they were busy having fun exploring the space craft without her, she would do some investigating of her own. She would find out the cause of this time problem. And then they would be forced to show her some respect. Yes, that would show them.

Determined, Vicki set off down the alley in pursuit of the shadowy figure.

The Doctor stroked his temples, his furrowed brow illuminated by the warning lights. 'Yes, yes, the energy radiation. Hmm. There has been a

malfunction with the engines, causing this craft to become stranded here, yes.'

Steven looked at the dials. They all looked meaningless to him. He tried to wrestle with what the Doctor had told him. 'You mean they broke down? And that's why they crashed?'

'I couldn't have put it better myself,' said the Doctor, grinning at some private joke.

Steven tried to draw him back to the matter in hand. 'But you think you will be able to repair it?'

'Given a few hours, yes, I believe I can.' The Doctor smiled like a benevolent grandparent.

Steven rested himself on the cockpit wall. 'You know, it's lucky that time has stood still,' he said. 'Otherwise you wouldn't have the chance to make the repairs.'

'But don't you realise, my boy, that is precisely the point,' said the Doctor. 'Time has been stopped so that we have the opportunity to make the necessary repairs.'

'What do you mean?'

The Doctor steepled together his hands. 'Imagine you are in a space craft, and it is about to explode in a matter of minutes due to some difficulty. If you could bring time to a standstill, that would afford you the time to avert the disaster. It is the ideal solution.'

'So you're saying that time has come to a halt because of this?'

'Quite so, quite so.' The Doctor waved a hand towards a set of levers situated beside the right seat. 'It is part of the safety mechanism. When things go wrong, rather than pressing on the brake pedal, why not bring time itself to a stop? Then you can make repairs or evacuate, if need be.' Steven couldn't tell whether the Doctor was more impressed by the technology on display or his own deductive powers. 'Ingenious! Ingenious!'

'But if they have time technology –' Steven began.

'Of course, my boy, of course,' said the Doctor. 'We are standing in a time machine.'

'A time machine? Like the TARD–'

'And they have, for some reason, crashed here. They have brought the fourth dimension to a halt. The people who made this ship are

clever people, you know.'

'So,' deadpanned Steven with a sigh. 'Where are they now?'

'That is a good question. Presumably they have gone to fetch the items to equip them to make repairs.'

Steven looked out of the open hatchway into the empty London street. 'You mean, they're somewhere out there?'

By his tone, the Doctor considered the question obvious. 'Yes, yes.'

'And they're going to come back here?'

'I should expect so, yes.' The Doctor raised his eyebrows with amusement at Steven's concern.

'What sort of people do you think they are?'

The Doctor coughed and dabbed his cheeks with his handkerchief. 'Before you ask me more questions like that, perhaps we should step outside.' He wiped his forehead. 'It is terribly stuffy in here! And on such a warm day!'

Steven let the Doctor climb out of the craft, and watched him carefully as he lowered himself to the ground below. Steven braced himself against the sides of the hatchway, and then jumped. Outside, he blinked in the sudden harsh sunlight. The Doctor, meanwhile, seemed more concerned with brushing his sleeves and adjusting his collar.

A hand shielding his eyes, Steven scanned the shop windows overlooking the craft. 'Well, Doctor? What do you think has happened to the ship's crew?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor sagely. 'But I should like to meet them! Yes, I would!'

Steven looked back at the craft. The fuel pipes were still sending a black cloud spiralling into the overhead sky. 'And what are they doing here? Why did they crash?'

'Those are very intelligent questions. I was thinking them myself.'

Steven turned back to the Doctor. 'I've got another question for you. Where's Vicki?'

'Vicki?' The Doctor looked around worriedly. He pursed his lips in agitation. 'Oh, where has that impossible child got to?'

'She can't have gone far.' Steve paced around the square, checking the alleys and streets and shops. The first shop window he came to

was covered in dust and filled with shelf after shelf of clocks. Steven gazed inside. There were clocks of every variety; carriage clocks, wall clocks, cuckoo clocks. There was something unusual about them, but for a moment Steven couldn't place what it was. And then it hit him. Each clock face showed the time. Eleven fifty-seven.

'Doctor, over here,' called Steven.

'What is it, my boy?' The Doctor hastened over to Steven, and gazed down into the window.

'Look,' said Steven, 'The time.'

The Doctor gave a startled gasp. 'How could I have been so wrong?'

'What?' Steven felt a sudden chill, and rubbed his neck. 'How long would you say we have been here?' the Doctor asked him, in sudden seriousness.

'Well, it's hard to tell. A couple of hours or so.'

'Exactly. And yet that clock over there reads three minutes to twelve.'

'But when we arrived — the time was eleven fifty-five.'

'Quite so.' The Doctor's fingers twitched. 'Since we have arrived, two whole minutes have passed.'

'What?' exclaimed Steven.

'Don't you see, my boy? Don't you see?' said the Doctor. 'We presumed that time had been brought to a halt. But it hasn't. No, time has merely been slowed down. Slowed down to a point that, to us, it was imperceptible. Progressing at a snail's pace, but it has still been moving forward nonetheless.'

'But if that's the case –'

The Doctor nodded. 'We don't have much time left at all. At the current rate, this space craft will explode in approximately five hours!'

The figure had disappeared. Glancing left and right, Vicki ran down the passage, her footsteps clicking on the pavement. She had chased the shadowy shape down backstreet after backstreet turning left and right until she was completely disorientated. She no longer knew where she was, or how to get back to the Doctor and Steven. Feeling utterly alone and lost, she wished they were with her, or that she could call

out to them for help. Oh, why had she been so stupid and impetuous?

Vicki rested against a brick wall to recover her breath. The figure must have run down this passage before her, but now there was no trace of it. But Vicki could sense it was somewhere nearby. Perhaps it was even watching her. She recoiled at the thought, her eyes wide with fear.

Something moved further down the passage. Vicki pulled herself upright and walked towards it. 'Hello?' she called. 'Hello? Doctor? Steven?'

A gloved hand clamped itself over her mouth and pulled her backwards. Astonished, Vicki's first impression was of the overwhelming smell and taste of the leathery fabric of the glove. Then her feet slipped as she swung around, coming suddenly face to face with her attacker.

The figure stood about six feet tall and wore a bulbous grey space suit. Valves and pipes covered the suit from head to toe. A domed helmet enclosed the head, but Vicki could still make out the basic features within. Two giant, staring eyes, unblinking, like those of a fish. And the impression of dark scales and a wide open mouth.

Vicki screamed.

We move in on the face of the alien, bringing every detail of its huge, plate-like eyes and yawning mouth into terrifying focus. We hold the image for a few seconds, the creature's features filling our view.

Caption:

NEXT EPISODE
THE TIME TRAVELLERS

We fade to black as the music begins...

GRAEME NEIL REID

Self Delusion

JON ANDERSEN

'What is it?' Peri asks in a wonderment-filled whisper, curbing a desire to reach toward and touch something that, for all she knows, will melt

her fmgers off.

'A watah'ci,' the Doctor answers. He sounds half tourist-guide, half kid with a new toy to show off. 'Very beautiful and mostly harmless.' He pauses for a moment, broad features quite serious. 'Quite like myself, I should think.'

She pokes out her tongue. He pokes his back out at her, then both of them break into smiles and look once more at the watah'ci hovering in front of them. Its gossamer wings are moving so fast, they seem nothing more than a cloud of iridescence surrounding the little creature.

Large eyes watch them in turn, dark and unblinking.

'You said 'mostly harmless'?' she asks as the watah'ci darts to one side, its angular head tilted slightly to inspect the Doctor's coat. Her voice sounds a little unsure now.

'Oh, nothing to worry about,' the Doctor says airily. 'They're no more dangerous than an Earth housecat.' He holds out the last of his recently discovered chocolate bar towards the creature with an encouraging twitter of sound. Chirruping, it snatches the morsel and flies away.

'So where are we anyway, Doctor? We've been here half an hour and nothing's attacked us yet.'

'Oh, how you malign me with your cruel words!' the Time Lord proclaims in mock protest, or in something that sounds like it. 'It's not like I thrust us boldly into the midst of adventure and danger with every landing the TARDIS makes, is it?'

'Well, not every... '

'See, nothing to complain about. The Cerrone system is famed throughout the Andromeda galaxy as a place of natural splendour. As a botanist, I thought you might appreciate this world the most. This,' and here he makes an expansive gesture to encompass the forest they have been wandering though for the past hour, 'is a planet-wide botanical garden, terraformed to host every form of flora known to exist in the Chiral Hegemony. It really is quite a marvellous feat of planetary engineering.'

'It looks like a California redwood forest,' Peri remarks, still sounding impressed by what her friend's words have described. 'Until I saw that watar'key -'

'Watah' ci.'

'Whatever.' She sighs in exasperation at the Doctor's pedantic nature. 'Until I saw it, I thought we'd ended up back to Earth.'

'Do I detect the slight hint of rebuke in your voice, young lady?' Crossing his arms, the Doctor comes to a halt. 'Do you have a problem w...'

'Of course not,' Peri answers before his dudgeon can climb any higher than it already is. 'Honestly, Doctor, you're such a damn drama queen sometimes.'

'I am merely highly strung,' he pouts defensively.

Peri just makes an affirmative sounding noise and continues down the pathway. To the rear, she can hear the Doctor pointedly not moving for several moments before he starts to follow her.

I don't know why I stay with him sometimes, she thinks, pushing a large fern frond out of her way. *I suppose the good has to outweigh the bad with him. And that I 'd probably only want to go with him again if he left me behind. I mean, without the Doctor I'd be stuck with mom and Howard again, or whoever her latest toyboy is. Stuck on Earth when it's still an isolated backwater and everyone thinking I'm crazy if I tell them anything about what's happened to me. About the Daleks and Cybermen and Mentors and Time Lords.*

Through the distant canopy, Peri can make out that the vaguely orange globe of the sun appears to be most of the way up the curve of the sky, so she assumes that it's still the morning. Pausing for a moment, she fans the bottom of her t-shirt to get some cool air up against her sweaty skin. *Thank god I decided to wear sneakers instead of sandals today.*

Hands in pockets, the Doctor walks past her, muttering to himself in a language he doesn't want her to understand. She hates the way that when he wants to, the Doctor doesn't bother sweating. Most of the time it's not something he seems worried about, and is quite happy to puff along. But there are times, like now, where he seems to feel the need to show off to redress a wounded sense of dignity. And that's when she hates it.

'Do they have, like, park rangers here?' she asks, following the Doctor again.

'After a fashion,' he answers, his sulk already begining to evaporate. 'The every day patrols are taken care of by autonomous drones, and if they encounter any problems they contact a base station and ask for sentient assistance.'

'Sounds very efficient.'

'Should be, since I designed it for them.'

I've heard that before, she thinks, wisely not saying so aloud. 'How long ago was that? For you, I mean.'

'Oh, a good half millennia at least, while I was still in my first body.' He smiles in nostalgic pleasure at a memory she can only guess at. 'They were faced with a limited budget, as places like this so often are, and it was only my genius that allowed this grand endeavour to avoid collapse in that initial year.'

'Wish I'd brung my camera,' she sighs after making appropriate 'That's nice, Doctor' noises.

'Brought,' he corrects her.

Word fascist, she glares at his back to no noticeable effect. Then she stops, looking around, suddenly troubled. 'Doctor...' she hisses.

'What?' he asks, turning around, his normally brash voice quietening in response to her unease.

'There's something here.'

'Nonsense,' the Doctor declares, still keeping his voice lowered.

'I heard it break a twig,' she insists. 'That really heavy kind of snap made by something placing its weight on hardened cellulose.'

'That's a word I haven't heard you use before.' But something rings false, like the Time Lord is trying to use the old banter to reassure himself or throw their stalker of its stride.

'Just because I don't like talking that way doesn't mean I can't, Doctor,' she answers with a touch of irritability not entirely feigned.

'Peri, you don't feel any breeze do you?'

'No. Why?'

'Because the bush behind us is moving. Now when I say run...'

'Run. I know the drill.'

'I should hope so, young lady. We've done it often enough.'

'That isn't reassuring,' she mutters sourly.

'Run.'

The sound of running footsteps fades into nothingness, the rustling of disturbed foliage receding soon afterwards.

From behind the bush, a short man wearing a white linen suit gets to his feet, chuckling with a faint Scot's burr.

'That was nasty,' the woman sitting next to him comments, her accent placing her in the Home Counties.

'But necessary, Bernice,' the Doctor shrugs. 'I've always wondered what it was that spooked Peri and myself when I was here last, so I decided to investigate.'

'And, surprise surprise, it was you.' Bernice's voice is slightly mocking.

'You don't very well expect me to create a paradox now, do you?' He chides gently, swinging his umbrella onto his shoulder.

'Perish the thought.'

Helping his companion to her feet, he wanders off in the direction Peri and her version of himself had originally been moving, whistling birdsong.

Smug git, Benny thinks to herself from a few paces behind.

'I heard that.'

When, a few minutes later, they reach the stream by which the TARDIS waits, Benny pushes him into it just as he starts to cross the stepping stones to the other side. His indignant squawk of protest is cut off by the loud splashing of water.

Ace, leaning against the side of the TARDIS, just raises her sunglasses and smiles at Benny. 'I've wanted to do that so much sometimes,' she calls out as Benny hurries past the floundering Time Lord before he can exact revenge.

The two women watch as the Doctor stalks up the gentle slope of the embankment, mini cascades of water flowing off him to leave a dark trail on the leaf litter covering the forest floor. He says nothing, walking past his still grinning companions with a look of studied dignity. It's only as they follow him into the TARDIS that his words float back to them.

'Right, it's the wheelie bin for both of you…'

The Arches

CAVAN SCOTT & MARK WRIGHT

To most, Asteroid K-8741 was a lifeless lump of space rock, spinning through the velvet void of the cosmos. To Lieutenant Cheuy Nilclon of the Galactic Ordinance Corps it signalled the end of a glittering career. While completing the 675th Survey of the Mutters Spiral, Nilclon reported that nestling between two craggy peaks of the rogue asteroid sat a Victorian railway arch. The powers that be decided that Nilclon was drunk in charge of a warp drive and sent him packing. His wife left him, he lost his membership of the Alpha Centauri zero-G Golf club and ended up cleaning tables at a fast food establishment on Pluto. It's a sad tale, but not our story for today. No, our interest lies in events behind the rusty, corrugated iron of the Victorian railway arch that certainly did exist on Asteroid K-8741.

Mitch washed down the remains of his bacon butty with a swig of sweet tea. Behind him, hidden behind a pile of tyres, the space/time visualiser pumped out the final track from the Spice Girls' reunion album, but other than that, all was quiet. Work had been scarce over the last few months, but Mitch wasn't worried. He had enough readies in the bank and besides, he was thinking about a holiday. Ancient Egypt maybe? The hanging gardens of Draconia? What about the Nymphoidian pleasure planet? Now, that would be nice.

His daydreaming was shattered by the shrill peal of a bell on the wall by his faded girly calendar. Someone was arriving. Dropping his paper on the workbench, Mitch flicked through the diary. No, no-one was booked in for a service. Might be a new customer. Better make a good impression. Quickly, he brushed crumbs and bits of bacon rind from his oily overalls and looked up as a wheezing, groaning sound filled the garage. In the corner by the doors a tall blue box heaved into existence, a light above its Police Box sign flashing in time to the thunder of its temporal engines. When the dust had settled, a door in the box opened and a head popped out, little eyes glittering from

beneath a straw hat.

'No!'

The Doctor looked hurt. 'No?' he asked quizzically. Mitch detected a slight burr hovering at the edge of the voice. None of the others had that.

'No! Not now, not ever. I told you last time, get out of it!'

Mitch grabbed a wrench from the workbench and advanced on the Time Lord, waving the tool before him threateningly. The Doctor closed the TARDIS door, but remained standing in the Police Box's protective shadow as the mechanic leaned over him, the two men standing practically nose-to-nose.

'Ah, yes, it's lovely to see you as well, Mitch. Is everything OK?'

'Is everything OK? Is everything OK?' Mitch's boom threatened to rattle the tools hanging on the garage wall. 'Having a bit of memory loss, are we, me old china? Conveniently forgetting that the last time you were here you skipped off without paying the bill.'

The Doctor's face crumpled in an expression of acute embarrassment. 'Oh. Did I?'

'Don't try and wriggle out of it, Doctor. You waltz in here, your stupid multi-coloured coat flapping around!' The mechanic stopped mid-flow, a thought suddenly occurring to him. 'What was it with that coat, anyway?'

The Doctor appeared mildly affronted. 'I happened to like it. It was very fashionable on Stelle Stora at the time.'

'Anyway,' Mitch continued, his attack on the Doctor's fashion tastes abandoned, 'was it my fault your TARDIS had turned into an organ? I told you not to fiddle with the chameleon circuit again, but no, I still fixed it, didn't I?'

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak, but then quickly closed it again. He sighed, leant against the TARDIS and waited patiently for the Mechanic to finish.

'Who do you renegades think you are anyway, eh? You swan around the vortex in these nicked TARDISes, putting 'em through goodness knows what, then come running back to good old Mitch every time a fluid link goes pear shaped.

'There's the Master. Getting all hot under the collar 'cos the drift

compensator I fitted didn't come with a kosher two Millennium warrantee. OK, I could understand he was a bit miffed, but there was no need to shrink my apprentice like that, was there? This big he was!'

The Doctor nodded sympathetically as Mitch waved his fingers in the Time Lord's face in demonstration.

'And what about the Rani? She turns up here, all charm, smiles and leather pants. I turn my back for one second and she dumps a T-Rex in me backyard! What am I supposed to do with that then? I should have listened to my Loom Matron and stayed on Gallifrey, paying my way through the Academy as a TT-Capsule technician. And another thing...'

The chink of money against concrete halted Mitch's tirade. There on the floor lay a little velvet bag that had previously inhabited one of the Doctor's many capacious pockets.

'I think you'll find that covers any outstanding debt,' said the Doctor as Mitch scooped up the bag. 'With interest,' he added. 'I always clear my account. Besides,' The Doctor rested the point of his umbrella lightly against Mitch's chest, 'you owe me a favour after I got you out of that scrape with the Daleks. Fancy selling them a stolen SIDRAT in the first place.'

Mitch cleared his throat and quickly pocketed the cash. Should he tell him that it was at least five times too much? Oh well, if he had money to throw away...

'Let's not worry about the past, Doctor, my old mate!' He clapped a friendly arm around the Time Lord's shoulders and led him towards the table. 'What can I do for you?'

The Doctor grinned at the Mechanic's change of hearts.

'Well Mitch, I've just been visiting friends on Earth in December 1643.'

'Oh yeah, lovely time of year.' Mitch agreed enthusiastically.

'Yes, well,' the Doctor glanced at the TARDIS, 'The old girl's been having a spot of bother getting started in the morning and I realised that she's overdue for her bi-centennial refit. So I thought I'd pop by for a quote.'

Mitch sucked air through his teeth and rocked gently on his heels, casting an expert eye over the battered exterior of the Doctor's TARDIS.

'A quote, you say? Hmmm, let me see. Bi-centennial refit on a model which, no offence, has been around the block a few times.' He folded his arms. 'It'll cost you, Doc.'

The Doctor sighed and began fishing around in his pockets again.

'How much?'

The answer never came as the arrival bell started ringing urgently from its place on the wall. Another customer! Today was turning out to be busier than Mitch had imagined. That intensely annoying wheezing groaning sound echoed around the garage once again.

The Doctor and Mitch frowned at each other as the sound of car doors slamming came from behind the tall, corrugated gates and booted feet crunched over asteroid gravel.

'Expecting anyone else, Mitch?'

Mitch never answered - he was too busy diving behind the table as the doors dissolved in a red haze and an energy beam lanced across the yard, igniting fuel canisters in its wake. He landed in a heap, flame scorching the soles of his well-worn boots. He peered over the top of the table. The Doctor was nowhere in sight. Had he been vaporised? Through the smoke and debris, he could see a pair of burly silhouettes appear in the doorway. As they lumbered forward, Mitch thought there was something familiar about their gait. Yes, they were wearing very bad fitting suits and midnight shades, but they were unmistakably Ogrons. Since when did those brutes start visiting tailors?

Mitch heard himself shout something about no stasers in the yard, but he soon shut up as the towering hulks both placed a massive paw on his shoulders. He closed his eyes as the Ogrons bodily lifted him over the table and dragged him into the middle of the wreckage that was now his garage. Another figure entered the yard, smaller, and affecting a confident swagger that wasn't entirely convincing. However, with two Ogrons breathing their rank breath into his face, it was convincing enough. The newcomer wore an expensive camel coat draped over some equally pricey threads and a smug smile played over the oval face. Mitch recognised him as an old sparring partner of the Doctor's. In days gone by, he had called himself the Monk, but these days he usually went by the name of...

'Mortimus! Old pal. What a lovely surprise.'

Mortimus stepped forward, craning his head back slightly to take in the Mechanic's grizzled features. 'Mitch, 'old pal'. How are you?' Mortimus' voice was like treacle running off a spoon.

'Um, what can I do for you? Drift compensators need tweaking? Time rotor sticking again?'

Mortimus chuckled good naturedly, shaking his head. 'Oh, nothing of the sort, old friend. Just a social call. Do you know what I've got in my pocket?'

Mitch shook his head. This was all he needed. Guessing games with an insane Time Lord.

'No?' Mortimus placed a hand into the pocket of his coat, retrieving a silver ball from within. 'Oh look,' he said in mock surprise, as if seeing the object for the first time. 'A temporal grenade. Now how did that get there?'

Mitch squirmed under the grip of the Ogrons' chubby fingers, smiling uncomfortably. 'Have I done something to upset you?'

'Do I have to refresh your memory? Remember those thermic conductors I took off your hands a couple of decades back? At a rather over inflated price, I might add.'

Mitch spread his hands in a win-some lose-some gesture. 'You know how it is. Business is business.' The Ogrons increased the pressure on Mitch's shoulder and he winced in pain. What had got into him? It wasn't Mortimus' style to have a pop like this.

'Yes, and it nearly put paid to *my* business. There I was, about to create some temporal havoc in Indonesia.' Mitch watched him grin at his own plan. 'Holographic entertainment technology. I had them rolling over and begging for it. Then BANG! The conductors blew sky high, taking half my TARDIS and most of Krakatoa with them.'

Mitch flashed his best "What can you do" smile at him. 'It was an honest mistake. I would never have...'

'No, Mitch, it was your last mistake.' Mitch whimpered as Mortimus tossed the temporal grenade in the air and caught it deftly. The little Time Lord began pacing up and down, spit flying from his lips in tiny globules. 'Everyone thinks this Mortimus is just a fool, a meddler who merely throws rocks into the pool of time because they make nice ripples!'

Mitch really didn't know what to say. Where *was* the Doctor?

'Well now,' continued Mortimus, 'It's time to show everyone what I'm made of - those pathetic renegades are going to get a wake up call next time Mortimus comes knocking, and I'm going to start by blowing the Arches across five different time streams.'

Mitch closed his eyes, praying. Hard.

'Just five Mortimus? Where's your ambition?'

Mitch opened his eyes to see Mortimus spin on his heels, grenade still clutched in his hands. Mitch looked to see Doctor step out from a pile of tyres, wafting the remaining smoke away with his hat. Mortimus stared daggers from beneath hooded eyes.

'You! Well I never. The proverbial bad penny as always, Doctor.' The Doctor looked almost proud of his fellow Time Lord's insult. 'Clear off, this is between the Mechanic and myself. I don't want innocent bystanders getting hurt.'

'Innocent bystander? I thought I was just a pathetic renegade?'

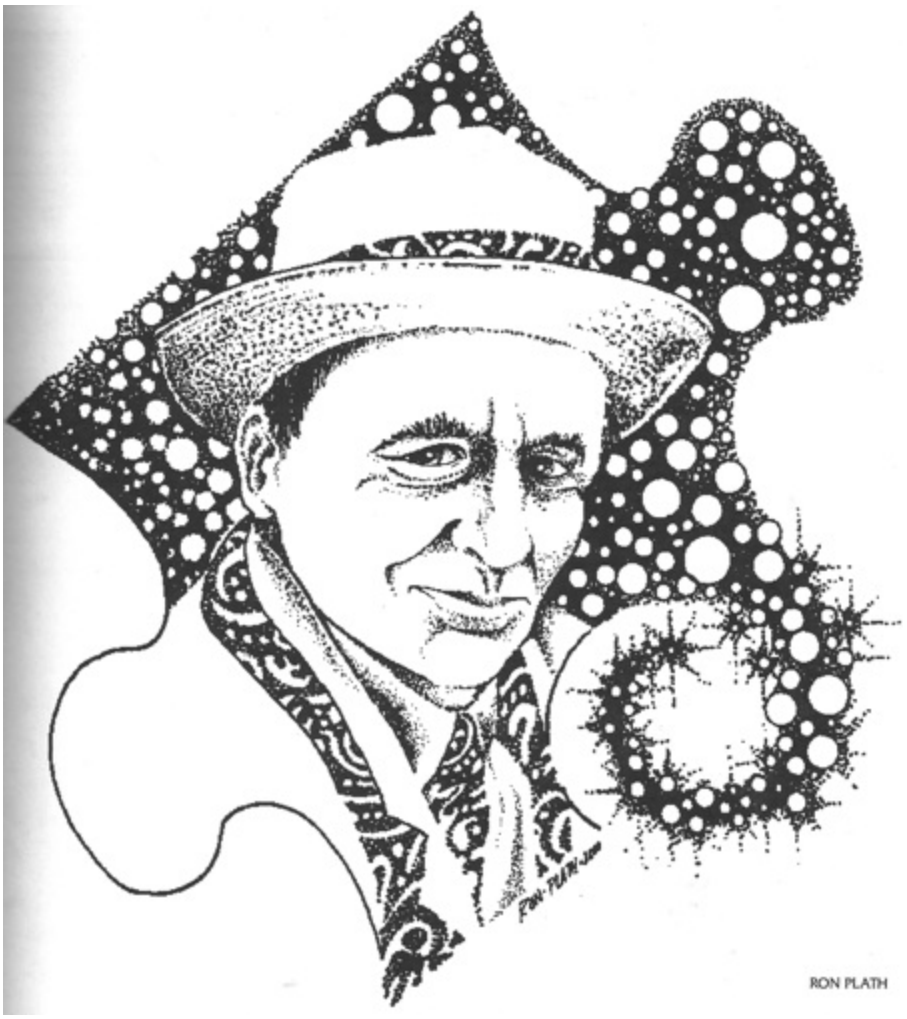
Mitch stared at the Doctor with pleading eyes. The Time Lord stared back briefly, before glancing at the two Ogrons, snarling on either side. He sighed, replaced his hat, and began to walk back to the TARDIS.

'Oi! Doctor! Don't leave me!' Mitch could have burst into tears.

The Doctor turned back. 'I'm sorry, Mitch. Mortimus is right. This is between you and him.'

'You ungrateful...'

'Thank you for being so understanding, Doctor.' Mortimus stepped forward, a gleeful expression lighting up his pudgy face.



'Not at all.' The Doctor placed the key into the TARDIS lock as Mortimus stepped towards the Mechanic, fingers caressing the safety catch of the grenade. Mitch gulped.

What happened next took literally seconds, but to Mitch, it could have been hours. The Ogrons tightened their grip. The grenade hummed as the safety catch was released. Mortimus' face filled his entire field of vision as the little man threw the grenade towards him. In a blur, the Doctor swung around, skilfully hooking the arcing silver missile with the handle of his umbrella. Before anyone could move, he'd bounded onto the mountain of tyres, whipped a couple of apples from his pockets and stood there juggling the fruit with the grenade, a huge grin on his face.

'Give me that back,' warned Mortimus, but was greeted by nothing more than a whistled rendition of 'Always Look on the Bright Side of

Life'. Mitch smiled in spite of himself.

'Don't just stand there you idiots! Get him!'

Mitch breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the Ogrons dropped him to the floor and lurched towards the Doctor. The mechanic stayed in a crumpled heap, watching the entertainment atop the mountain of tyres.

'Is this what you want?' called the Doctor to the advancing Ogrons, throwing the grenade high in the air while still juggling the apples. The hulking figures stopped their ascent, grunted and turned to their master, confusion reigning in their piggy little eyes.

'Well? What are you waiting for?' yelled Mortimus. 'Get it!'

'What, this? Here, catch!' The Doctor lobbed the grenade high into the air once more. Every eye, including Mitch's, followed the deadly bauble, glinting brightly as it reached the top of its arc. The two Ogrons stretched out their thick, clumsy arms as it began to plummet towards them. The grenade beeped happily to itself as it thudded into a massive, leathery palm.

Two sets of yellowing teeth grinned happily at their boss until the grenade erupted in a flash of multi-coloured light.

Mitch blinked, clearing the glare from his retinas. When he finally looked up, the two Ogrons had vanished. All they left behind was a column of smoke and two pairs of midnight shades that clattered to the base of the mound of tyres.

The Doctor clambered down the rubber mountain, extending an arm to Mitch. The Mechanic looked up at the Doctor and grinned, allowing the Time Lord to haul him to his feet.

'Sorry about that, Mortimus,' apologised the Doctor. 'I must have accidentally reset the grenade.' He tutted. 'Oh well, I'm sure your Ogrons will be very happy in Loch Ness.' Mitch could have sworn he heard the Doctor whisper under his breath, 'I must stop doing that...'

The Doctor just had time to hold Mortimus at bay with the tip of his umbrella before he had chance to whack him with the crowbar he had grabbed from the workbench. With Mortimus squirming angrily, he turned and fixed Mitch with a steely stare.

'Pay the man his money.'

Mitch coughed nervously under the Doctor's gaze. 'Come on, Doctor,' he started, 'I simply don't have that kind of cash lying around.

It's just not safe, you know, all kinds of reprobates hanging around the galaxy these days. I mean, it's more than me...'

'What about that bag of gold I gave you earlier?'

'But Doctor...'

'Mitch!'

There was no mistaking the threat in the Doctor's voice. Muttering under his breath, Mitch stuck a hand into his pocket and pulled out the now grime encrusted velvet bag. He held it out, somewhat reluctantly, towards Mortimus. Mortimus snatched the bag, quickly opening it to check the contents.

'Well,' he grumbled, 'I'm not happy, but I'm sure we can put all this behind us. In future, I shall be taking my business elsewhere.'

And with that he flounced off, grumbling something about slap-dash cowboy operations. Mitch didn't breath until the sound of his TARDIS dematerialising had faded into the ether.

'Now, about that quote, Mitch?'

'Ah yes,' said Mitch, suddenly snapping back into business mode and trying to find his diary amongst the litter on his desk. 'I reckon I can fit you in... what about next Thursday?'

The Doctor grinned. 'I believe that will do nicely.'

The two men were about to shake on the deal when the bell began ringing once again.

'Would you Adam and Eve it?' sighed Mitch. 'You can wait Millennia for a Time Lord, then three turn up at once.'

Through the gap where the rusty iron gates had once stood, a battered, red, London Transport bus chugged into the yard. Mitch saw the Doctor's face crumple in fear and, if he didn't know better, he swore he heard a whimper.

Before he knew what was happening, the Doctor was practically sprinting for his TARDIS.

'Doctor,' he called after him. 'What about that service?'

'Tell you what Mitch,' the Doctor babbled as he fumbled with the TARDIS key. 'Let's forget about it.' He shot one last, fearful glance towards the bus, opened the door to the Police Box and disappeared inside.

From the darkness, Mitch heard him shout, 'See you next

regeneration!'

The door slammed shut and the TARDIS faded away.

Juggling

Zoe Ellis

'And your friend works at this university?'

'Works here? My dear Nyssa, he's a lecturer at one of the colleges. In fact, as I haven't seen him since my curly-haired days, he might even be a Fellow by now.'

Nyssa side-stepped a flower bed, making what she hoped was a suitably impressed face. The Doctor had landed the TARDIS in Oxford, in a park he had referred to (with a very audible capital letter) as the Parks and had enticed her outside by the promise of tea and biscuits with a friend of his. Thus it was that she found herself crunching down a gravel path in the formally laid-out gardens while the Doctor, chatting away, strode along on the grass beside her.

'Physics is his métier – nanotechnology, quantum wells, that sort of thing. You'll get on like a house on fire.'

Nyssa wondered for a moment how her telebiogenetic skills were going to mesh with Duncan Howard's hard science, but decided to let it pass.

'Yes, Doctor. Of course we will.'

The Doctor gave her a sunny smile, demonstrating both that he knew he was being humoured and how much he appreciated it. Then the smile broadened into a grin and his gaze became vague as he looked over her shoulder.

'Ah!' he exhaled with great satisfaction. 'I wondered if I'd got the season right! Well done, old girl!'

Nyssa turned. A few hundred yards away, a group of men dressed in white were dotted over an expanse of precisely mown grass, engaging in a tortuous-looking series of stretches and muscle pulls. She glanced from them to the Doctor and back again, and knew he was lost.

She sighed. Sometimes she felt very old when confronted with his child-like delight.

'Why don't you go and watch for a while?' she suggested, knowing that nothing less than a full discharge from an ion bonder would stop him. 'It's a lovely day – I can walk around and admire the architecture. I probably need the fresh air. We can find your friend Duncan later on.'

'If you insist,' said the Doctor briskly, unfurling his Palma hat with a snap. 'But don't lose track of time; you know what can happen when you wander off.'

'Me?' said Nyssa indignantly. 'I'm not the one who...' She stopped when she saw the mischievous glint in his eyes. 'You're teasing me!'

'Only very gently, and only by way of thanks,' he replied, placing the hat on his head in a gesture of farewell. 'And if you get bored...'

'I'll come and find you. You'll probably be saving the day by then.' She watched as he strode away towards the wickets, then continued along the path out of the gardens.

It was a beautiful spring day, of a type Nyssa had come to associate with her frequent visits to Earth. Tegan had told her it was 'bloody British weather', waxing lyrical instead about the heat of her home country, but Nyssa herself preferred a slight dampness in the air and the optimistic feeling carried by sunshine after rain. Even so, she was grateful for her velvet jacket and trousers to ward off the cool breeze.

She emerged from the gardens through a wrought-iron gate, spotted a garish-looking building on the opposite side of the road, and crossed over to investigate. She had no intention of waiting around while the Doctor played games.

'Northam College,' she read from an ornately lettered board popped against the wall. 'Visitors welcome. Quiet please.' Feeling herself to be desirably silent, she stepped beneath the heavy, iron-studded lintel and entered the college proper.

The architect had evidently been colour-blind, with a weird sense of what Nyssa had once heard the Doctor refer to as the Gothic. Red, yellow and blue bricks jostled for space, forming crazily zigzagging patterns on the turrets spiralling high into the sky. She blinked a few times to get accustomed to the sight, realised it wasn't going to work, and continued resignedly on her way around the main quad. Coming across an arch outlined in gaudy yellow brick, she ducked her head and

moved through it into a smaller quad boasting an arrangement of ornamental shrubs at its centre. High open doorways led off to a succession of staircases, each bearing a list of names at its foot.

She had thought herself alone until she caught a blur of motion from the corner of her eye. On the opposite side of the quad was a young man with auburn hair, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt. The movement she had seen was a cascade of coloured balls that rose and fell through the air, propelled by expert movements of his long, thin hands. She tried to count them as he juggled, and then abandoned the attempt, fascinated by the precisely defined yet surely random patterns of blue, black, white, green, red. The only sounds were the young man's regular unhurried breathing and the swishing of the balls in the air. Nyssa watched raptly for what must have been fully five minutes before, prompted by some unknown signal, he tossed the balls vertically upwards in rapid succession, then waited for them to thud back into his palms like heartbeats. After that he permitted himself a small smile.

Nyssa surprised herself by breaking into spontaneous applause. Startled by his unknown audience, the young man swung round to face her. Blushing, she tried to explain herself.

'I'm sorry – I didn't mean to intrude. I was just visiting the college – I had no idea...'

Noticing that he seemed to be blushing as much as she was, she regained some of her poise. 'That was beautiful,' she said softly. 'You're very skilled. It must take lots of practice.'

He nodded. 'The ceiling in my room isn't high enough to let me throw properly, so I come out here in the afternoons when nobody's around. Usually, anyway.' His eyes were grey and slightly wary.

'I suppose it must be off-putting when people watch.'

'Not when they're quiet, like you. It's only a problem when they laugh.'

'They laugh?' Nyssa was surprised. 'Why?'

He smiled lopsidedly. 'Juggling isn't really a cool hobby to have, you know. Rowing, rugby, drinking vast quantities of alcohol and seeing who can throw up the most – that's the way to make friends round here.' He looked at her, was seemingly reassured by something he saw in her

face, and relaxed slightly. 'I'm glad you liked it, though. I planned that last routine for a show I'm doing tonight, and I wasn't sure it'd work. That's why I was getting in some last minute practice.'

'You do a juggling show?'

He grimaced. 'Juggling – and magic tricks.' When this didn't result in the mirth he obviously expected, he continued. 'I started to help out at a soup kitchen for the homeless a few weeks ago. The staff there discovered I'm interested in magic, juggling, sleight of hand, that sort of thing, and they asked me to do a show – a pre-dinner entertainment, if you like.' He gestured to the corner of the quad, where two large black cases and a rucksack were sitting. 'That's my stuff. Someone was supposed to come and help me carry it, but he hasn't turned up.'

'Can I do anything to help?' The words were out almost before she had a chance to think, but his air of self-mockery had intrigued her. 'I can manage one of the cases, if we go slowly.'

He spread his hands wide. 'That's incredibly kind of you, but don't you have colleges to visit, sights to see, things like that?'

'Well, I'm not really a proper tourist. I'm waiting for a friend of mine – he's playing cricket in the Parks. And between you and me,' Nyssa lowered her voice confidentially, 'I'd be glad of something to do until he's finished.'

The grey eyes frowned for a moment, then cleared as the defences behind them were lowered.

'Then I'd be happy to oblige a lady.' He grinned suddenly. 'You can leave a message at the porter's lodge, if you like, in case your friend comes looking for you. They're used to complete strangers wandering in off the street and asking for other complete strangers. It's how the whole university system works, after all.' He put out his hand. 'My name's Mark, by the way.'

'I'm Nyssa.' She extended her own hand to meet his, then pulled away from the handshake in surprise as she felt something cold touch her palm. She was left holding a large, golden coin.

'Only chocolate, I'm afraid,' he remarked shyly, 'but I do know women who prefer it to the real thing.'

'Where did it – I mean – your hand was empty!'

'Just warming up.' He brushed his fringe out of his eyes in a clumsy

gesture that she found surprisingly endearing. 'Shall we go?'

The Doctor applauded as the batsman drove the ball between fine leg and extra cover, nodding his head in appreciation. Aesthetically satisfied, his gaze ranged around the boundary and alighted on the only other spectator, a boy in his mid-teens. He was gazing at the fielders with a frown of concentration that blended the seriousness of youth with the intenseness of adolescence. With a sudden pang, the Doctor was painfully reminded of Adric. Even the mode of dress was similar; Earth fashion to be sure, but the shirt and the jeans were baggy as if the wearer wasn't really bothered about their appearance, merely their functionality.

He moved to stand next to the youth, and smiled in what he hoped was a non-threatening way.

'Lovely day for it,' he said, indicating the game.

The boy looked up, mused for a moment, then seemed to decide that the Doctor was worth speaking to after all.

'Maybe,' he replied, in a Northern-accented voice that had obviously recently broken. 'But that's not really the point, is it?'

'Isn't it? Sunshine makes it so much more enjoyable, I find.'

The boy sniffed, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

'Do you bat or bowl?' asked the Doctor, determined not to give up.

'Neither,' said the boy with an air of self-importance. 'I observe.'

'Observe what?' The Doctor was intrigued now.

'Field placings. Shot directions. The countless ways in which the two can interact.'

The Doctor winced slightly. The thought of his favourite game being reduced to mere angles and speeds was painful to him, but the abstraction shown by his young companion made him curious enough to refrain from comment.

'Do you often watch the matches here?' he asked.

'Every week.' The boy shuffled his feet, scuffing his trainers on a stone in the grass. 'On the way back from my tutorial.'

'Aren't you a little young for tutorials?'

The boy looked at him witheringly. 'Professor Markham teaches me for two hours every Wednesday.'

The Doctor felt his eyebrows elevating. 'A Professor, eh? That must be fascinating.'

'Oh, it is. But I don't suppose you'd understand.'

'Young man, you'd be very surprised at what I can understand. Now, why don't you tell me all about it over a cup of tea and some cream cakes?'

Nyssa banged her shins on the bulky case several times in her short journey with Mark to St Anselm's Church Hall. To take her mind away from the pain, she turned her thoughts back to Mark's juggling.

'Do you plan out in advance which ball to throw where?' she asked. 'It looked like you were following a particular set of permutations, but you were throwing so fast I couldn't be sure.'

Mark looked at her sideways, raising his eyebrows. 'No-one's ever said that to me before. Mostly they say "Get a life". Occasionally they say "Wow – aren't the colours pretty". Never do they say "It looked like you were following a particular set of permutations".'

Nyssa stiffened, feeling some of her Traken reserve returning. 'Well, were you?'

'I'm sorry – I wasn't poking fun, honestly.' He smiled so disarmingly that she had to forgive him. 'It's – well – you asked just the right question. I'm a maths student, you see.'

Nyssa smiled. 'I prefer more practical science myself, but I won't hold that against you.'

Mark laughed and hoisted the rucksack higher, on his shoulder. 'You're too kind. But, I must admit, I take pride in constructing my routines along solid theoretical lines. Permutations, combinations – the works. It lets me feel superior to all those people who aren't clever enough to spot what I'm doing.'

'So, do you feel superior to me?'

'Not at all. Strangely, I don't think I'd want to.'

They fell silent, manoeuvring their burdens through the rear door of the Church Hall and emerging alongside the kitchen.

'Mark! Hi! I thought you'd forgotten!' A large motherly woman bustled towards them, her arms full of sliced white loaves.

'You know me, Sue. I never miss a chance to humiliate myself in

public. Sue –Nyssa. Nyssa's giving me a hand.'

'Good for her,' said Sue, looking Nyssa up and down. 'Let me know when you're ready, and I'll announce you. By the time you're done, the stew'll be cooked.'

A huge lopsided blob of jam quivered atop the scone like a clot of blood.

'Would you like cream with that?' enquired the Doctor politely, proffering a china bowl. The youth nodded, applied a healthy dollop of cream, then bit into the multi-layered arrangement with evident relish. The Doctor watched, fascinated by the universal appetite of youth.

They were sitting in a small cafe in a converted boathouse by the river, ten minutes' walk from the cricket pavilion. The tourist season had yet to get into its stride, and they were the only patrons except for two students gazing at one another over a club sandwich, and a middle-aged couple in walking shoes and waterproofs, who were consulting a map of Oxford and earnestly discussing which college to visit next.

During their walk to the cafe, the youth had vouchsafed his name to be James. Having been fed, he was proving to be quite talkative.

'What do you study with the Professor?' asked the Doctor, pouring tea into a willow-patterned cup.

James sighed, shifting positions in his chair. 'Mathematical modelling of events in space-time. It's boring really.'

The Doctor added milk to the tea and watched the liquid cloud over.

'Oh, I doubt that,' he said quietly. 'I doubt that very much. Do you enjoy it?'

James shrugged, his eyes straying to the sight of a coxless pair rowing up the river. 'I suppose so. My parents want me get to university early, and this is one way to do it. The Prof keeps joking that I'll chuck it all in and go off designing virtual reality games or something, but that's not what I want. At least don't think it is. I don't know.'

'You're young,' said the Doctor reassuringly. 'You've got plenty of time to decide all that later. You should be having little fun while you can too.'

'Fun?' James laughed, a surprisingly free sound. 'Yeah right. Fifteen year olds like me really get to have fun.'

The Doctor returned to the safer topic of mathematics.

'Well, virtual reality modelling takes a great deal of skill too.'

'It's not very academic, though, which is why my Professor doesn't like it. What he doesn't seem to realise is that I don't just want to design a better computer program than the millions of other geeks out there.'

'Really?'

James leaned forward, blue eyes fixed intently on the Doctor. 'I want to go to the next level. I can't reach it yet, but I will. That's why I keep coming back here, week after week – until I can.'

Mark and Nyssa carried the cases onto a raised dais, which was curtained off from the rest of the hall. Mark squatted down and unpacked quickly, producing a dinner suit, top hat, silk scarves a horribly lifelike toy rabbit, a miniature guillotine and a small supply of carrots.

Nyssa helped him to unfold a wide, high table, draping a crimson cloth over it so that the material fell in symmetrical swathes down either side. She said little, feeling her lack of small talk keenly, imagining Tegan's non-stop chatter in the same situation. But gradually she realised that Mark was silent too, absorbed in the tools of his craft. Maybe the two of them were well matched after all.

'Great job,' said Mark, standing back after a while and viewing the results of their efforts with a critical eye. 'I can't thank you enough, Nyssa. You've got a real flair for design.'

Nyssa blushed again. 'It's been my pleasure.'

Mark picked up a deck of cards and ruffled it in a perfect stream from one hand to the other. 'I'd better go and get changed now. Will you stay and watch the show?'

'I wouldn't miss it for anything,' she said sincerely.

'I'm glad. I'm not vain enough to say that it'll be any recompense for your trouble, but I think you'll enjoy it nevertheless.'

Nyssa emerged from the backstage area and found herself in the kitchens. Catching sight of Sue, she asked her timidly if she needed any help. Her offer was met with enthusiasm, and she soon found herself applying margarine to a mountain of processed white bread. As

she did so, she watched the audience through the serving hatch as they took their places in the body of the hall. There was a large group of unkempt and grubby drifters, who were drawn more by the smell of the stew than by anything that might take place on the stage, a few slightly shabby but otherwise normal-looking men, and a clique of stick-thin child-women. Nyssa's attention was caught by an emaciated blond man, who stood out because of his full beard and wild but intelligent eyes. He sat in the front row and spoke to no-one.

Nyssa tried not to stare too obviously at any of them as she carried on with her work. This was all new to her – Traken had had its share of poor and homeless despite the Union's best efforts, but as Tremas's daughter she had been kept away from them. Her father had cared for the poor in the abstract – he enthusiastically praised the philosophical virtues of looking after society's dispossessed, donated generously to Union charities, and then turned his attention back to his scientific studies. Nyssa had had no choice but to do the same.

Looking at the rag-taggle collection of humans in front of her, she wanted desperately to help them, but she was only too aware of her own diffidence. It was one thing to help people like Mark who ignited a response deep within her, but it was quite another to be expected to help everyone.

Then she thought of the Doctor. Even when faced with world-shattering problems, he managed to split them up, break them down, and make a difference to individual lives. So, maybe all she could ever hope to do was help individuals. She couldn't save her world, or even this world, but she could show Mark some support.

She was jerked out of her musings by the sight of Sue climbing onto the dais.

'Gentlemen and ladies!' she announced. 'You all know him, but now you're going to see a side of him that you've never seen before. By popular demand, I present Mr Mark Foster!'

As if unveiling a plaque, she pulled back the curtain with a grand sweep of her arm. Mark was revealed, standing behind the draped card table, hair shining like beaten bronze against his well-cut dinner suit. The audience quietened down, and he began.

Nyssa watched, fascinated by his magician's patter and by how his

self-confidence seemed to have grown ten-fold since he took the stage. A seamless set of card tricks dazzled the eye, followed by intricate sleight of hand with chocolate coins and silk scarves, before he made the rabbit vanish into the hat and reappear under the table. Traken culture had had nothing so immediate, so seemingly spontaneous as this young man was offering his onlookers. He held them spellbound with a glance, a word, as they waited in vain for him to slip up and reveal his secrets. He never did.

For the finale of the show, Mark unveiled the miniature guillotine, no more than a foot high. First he demonstrated the sharpness of the blade by slicing through several carrots, then he called for a volunteer.

There was a moment of stillness, then the blond man rose to his feet from the front row and mounted the steps to the dais. Nyssa frowned – she could tell from the expression on Mark's face that he recognised him. He continued with his routine, gently winding up the blade, then reaching for the man's hand. But he had already placed it into the guillotine, up to the wrist. Mark looked surprised, but quickly recovered his poise. His volunteer looked as though he was embracing, even welcoming, the possibility of danger, a man who had nothing left to lose. Alarmed, Nyssa started to move forward, but at that moment Mark released the blade and it crashed down, slicing through the man's wrist – leaving it intact.

The audience gasped, then applauded loudly, one or two of the drifters even breaking into cheers. Mark bowed low as he gently ushered the man back to his seat. The volunteer looked bewildered, as if he had been cheated. He hadn't flinched once as the blade came down.

'The next level? I don't understand.'

James's hands curled into fists and then relaxed again. 'There's no reason why you should, but since you're the only person in years who's actually stopped to ask me what I think, I'll tell you anyway.'

'Go on.'

'I want to do more than design a program to make 2D look like 3D. I want to use my maths to create three dimensions for real.'

Whatever reaction he was expecting, it wasn't the look of horrified

recognition that came over the Doctor's face as he slowly sat back in his seat.

'Block transfer computation,' he whispered under his breath.

'What?' James licked some stray jam distractedly from his thumb. 'You know what I'm getting at, don't you?' He held the Doctor's gaze with one of his own; expectant, hungry.

The Doctor was suddenly giddy under an attack of memory. Nyssa, Tremas, the reappearance of the Master, Adric patiently inscribing dimensions in a notebook, his own agonising, arching fall to Earth. He was being forced to stare into the dark places of his own mind, and all because of a human boy.

He smiled at James in what he intended to be a disarming way. 'That's the wonderful thing about being young,' he said mildly, hoping that the youth couldn't see how tightly he was gripping the arms of his chair beneath the wicker table. 'You're open to fantastic possibilities, not stuck in the rigid avenues of acceptable scientific thinking. Mozart was just the same as a child, you know. Admittedly he was about ten years younger than you and an utterly spoilt brat into the bargain, but what music!' The Doctor whistled a few bars of a juvenile composition by way of illustration, until he caught sight of James still staring at him. 'Well, I liked it,' he said defensively.

'You haven't answered my question,' said James flatly, taking another scone although his stomach was already swirling uncomfortably from the preceding four. The Doctor was still absent-mindedly toying with his first. The students, having finished their sandwich and shared a Coke, exchanged a friendly wave with the proprietress and departed. They were closely followed by the middle-aged tourists, who had reached one of those stony silences so beloved of mid-term marriages. The Doctor and James were alone.

Except that they weren't, reflected the Doctor, at least for his part he could never be. Too many ghosts. A few words from him, a throwaway line or two, and James would be off, careering across the inclined plane of theory powered only by the spark of his imagination. But surely it was early, much too early, for block transfer computation to enter human technology.

'You've heard of Alan Turing, I presume,' he said, partly by way of

distraction. James pulled away from him, fingers playing abstractedly with a fraying shirt cuff.

'Of course. A computing pioneer. Built one of the first computers at Bletchley Park, to help crack German codes in the Second World War. I know my history, thank you.' He met the Doctor's gaze again. 'No doubt what you'd call a tormented genius. Committed suicide, for a reason that should never have been.'

'Indeed.' The Doctor steepled his hands beneath his chin, eyes clouding over with reminiscence. 'Turing had a fascinating mind – truly compelling. On the one hand, he constructed machines to perform repetitive tasks much faster than the human mind could ever wish to. On the other, he came up with a test to determine whether a computer could pass for human – a century or so ahead of his time.'

James nodded, face aglow with excitement. 'Exactly. But surely there comes a point where we have to stop, accept the fact that a computer and a human brain are different, and celebrate those differences, not erode them.' He leaned closer. 'Maybe there's a kind of maths, not all that far away in theory from virtual reality games, but light years away in understanding, that only the human brain can cope with and remain unchanged.'

The Doctor opened his mouth to agree, but caught himself just in time. Any scientist of this era would gently steer the boy away from such fancies back into safer waters. His previous self had crossed that line many times – too many times – with his off-the-cuff remarks, usually flung over his shoulder as he was leaving. It had suited him then, part of his flamboyance, the desire to remain other. These days he was cautious, reticent, more as a Time Lord should be, which both pleased and worried him. The trauma of his regeneration must have bitten deep.

If he was honest with himself, wasn't that why he'd come here, to see Duncan Howard? He needed to reassure himself that his hints hadn't taken root...

But was remaining silent always the best thing? In the past his interference had saved lives, races, worlds. If he encouraged James now, even slightly, he could arrange for him to be in the right place at the right time – discovering the fault in the code that had shrunk the

TARDIS on Logopolis, slowing down the effect of the Master's destruction. All the things that he could have taught Adric, if he'd only made the time.

He could save Traken. Restore Nyssa to her home.

Save himself – no. He had died and been reborn in that revelatory fall; that couldn't be changed. But Nyssa, the oh-so-visible reminder of how he'd failed to stop the Master – he could help her. Surely he would be allowed to do that. One phrase, one nod would be enough, here and now. His hands reached to his neck automatically, but found no scarf to adjust. Instead they brushed a stick of celery and he jerked back into himself, sickeningly aware of what he had to do.

'That's terribly interesting,' he said to James with a suitably bland smile, 'but I don't think your Professor'll let you pursue it, not for a good few years anyway.'

'Then you think I should give the whole thing up?' James sounded crestfallen, like a small boy whose toy had been taken away.

'Oh no,' said the Doctor softly. 'Never give up on your dreams – hope's one of the defining characteristics of the human psyche, after all. No. Wait until you're older, until you're in a position of strength in whatever field you choose for yourself. Then you can have your ideas and people will love you for them, even though it'll be the same you and the same ideas as you have now.'

And I'll be well out of range and unable to influence you, he added silently to himself.

James frowned then nodded slowly, confused by the Doctor's reaction but not enough of a rebel yet to argue. Suddenly he seemed old, tired, way beyond his years. 'My parents'll be wondering where I am,' he said. 'Let's go halves on the cream tea. I think we've both learned things today that we weren't expecting to.'

Sue went up to Mark and slapped him on the back, loudly declaiming her congratulations before returning to the kitchen to ladle out the stew into bowls. Marvelling at how the mood had lifted as a result of Mark's performance, Nyssa took the opportunity to slip quietly away to the front of the hall. She opened the door and stepped outside, feeling clean air on her face, breathing deeply.

There was another college facing her, a harmonious blend of honey-coloured stone and wooden shutters. She gazed up at its bell tower, marvelling to herself at its beauty, at the contrast, at the divide.

'That's where everyone wants to be – among the elite of the elite,' a mild voice said from her side. Mark had taken his jacket off and loosened his bow tie. His cufflinks gleamed silver as he raised one arm and placed it on the wall between them. 'We all want to earn the right to work there. Me too, when I'm being honest with myself, and I've got more chance of achieving it than most. I just hope that if I do, I won't stop what I'm doing now. But I'm terribly afraid that I will.' His eyes were bright and his face was flushed. Nyssa sensed that his mood was still high after being on stage.

'You've already done more than most people, including me, will ever do in their lives,' she replied quietly. 'I enjoyed that very much, Mark. Thank you.'

He opened his free hand, the mobile fingers telling out his thoughts. 'I hope you'll come next time too. Sue said it went down so well tonight, she'd like to make it a regular event.'

Nyssa looked down at her feet. She had been so wrapped up in the moment that she'd forgotten that it couldn't last. The Doctor must surely be looking for her by now...

Mark swallowed reflexively when she didn't answer. 'I'm sorry – I shouldn't have said that. It's just...'

'Thank you,' said Nyssa, feeling unprepared for whatever might come next, and seeking to forestall him. 'I'd love to come, but I doubt I'll still be here, that's all. My friend and I – we travel a lot, you see. Otherwise I wouldn't miss it for anything.'

He nodded, grappling with himself, changing topics awkwardly as he strove to reach firmer conversational ground. 'I got worried during the last trick, I'll tell you. I thought Dr Howard was going to freak out.'

'He wanted something to happen,' said Nyssa thoughtfully. 'Almost as if he was daring the guillotine to hurt him. Forgive me for saying this, but he doesn't seem quite stable.'

'He's one of the most brilliant men I've met,' said Mark simply. 'Although the line dividing genius from madness isn't one I'd like to draw myself. He used to be one of my tutors, with the unenviable job of

trying to teach physics to mathematicians.'

Nyssa frowned. Something had sounded familiar. 'Did you say Dr Howard? Duncan Howard?'

'That's right. Do you know him?'

'Not personally, but my friend does.'

'This cricket-playing friend? I'd like to meet him – he seems to know everyone.'

'He probably knows you too,' said Nyssa resignedly. 'Only you won't recognise him yet. Or maybe you would have recognised him once, but not any more.'

Mark wrestled with her logic for a few moments, then gave it up as too cryptic.

'Dr Howard's an incredibly lateral thinker, which in quantum theory is saying something. He could pluck ideas out of thin air, weave theories around them, and think of a practical application before the rest of us had time to open our mouths.'

'What happened?'

Mark shrugged. 'He had a breakdown. Something got to him – I've never been able to find out what. He gave up his job a few months ago – no warning, nothing. I saw him on the streets not long after, found out he came here, and decided to see if there was anything I could do. But he didn't want my help – he was adamant about that. And he made me promise not to tell anyone that I'd seen him. But I kept coming anyway – I mean, I couldn't just leave him.'

Nyssa remembered what the Doctor had been like just after his regeneration into the milder-looking yet somehow steelier Time Lord she now knew. He had been so weak that she, Tegan and Adric had feared for his life, yet there had been something within him, something unscathed by the pain and tiredness, which had pulled him through in the end. Maybe it was the same with this man. Perhaps she could use it to reach him.

She rested her hand briefly on Mark's shirtsleeve, then turned and went back into the hall. Duncan Howard, she saw, had taken only a few mouthfuls of stew before returning to his seat in front of the stage, gazing wistfully at the now empty space. She approached cautiously and sat down next to him, conscious of Mark hovering behind her.

'Dr Howard?' she began tentatively. 'My name's Nyssa. I hope you don't mind me talking to you like this, but we have a mutual friend who'll be worried about you.'

He turned his gaze fully upon her then, deep blue and serious, concealing more knowledge that she would ever possess. He absorbed the details of her face, her figure, and made an intuitive leap that bore witness to the truth of Mark's earlier words.

'You know him, don't you?' he said hoarsely, in a voice that sounded as though he had been out in cold air for too long. 'The Doctor – you know him. You have that look.' His back arched as he moved away from her. 'Don't tell him I'm here – don't – please. I'm away from all that now.'

'I won't say anything,' Nyssa soothed, sitting stock-still. 'I have a mind of my own, you know. The very last thing you need is to see someone who's going to upset you.'

Eventually, like a nervous bird settling after being disturbed by a cat, Duncan Howard resumed his seat. Nyssa breathed freely once more.

'Do you want to tell me what happened?' she asked, carefully so as not to scare him again. 'Anything you say will go no further, I promise.'

Howard rubbed his hand forcefully across his beard, as if trying to draw blood from his palm with the gold-red barbs. 'I first met him at a garden party – one of those academic affairs which everyone assumes have a vital purpose but actually exist only so that dons can get pissed on Pimms. I hadn't wanted to go but my professor imposed a three line whip, so I turned up in my suit and acceptable tie, fully prepared to be bored to within an inch of my life.' He stopped and coughed, as if he wasn't used to talking for so long.

'And he was there?' prompted Nyssa.

'Oh yes. He was there, sitting in a deckchair with that scarf hoped round his hands, playing cat's cradle all by himself. He looked so eccentric that he just had to be a research scientist, so I reckoned I could sit next to him and not be bothered by anything resembling a coherent conversation.'

You probably weren't far wrong there,' muttered Nyssa, reviewing her memories of the first Doctor she had known.

He said to me 'Young man – you look like you could do with a drink,'

and handed me a tall glass of iced water. Now I was overheated, cross, and I'd been working too hard to eat properly – that water was exactly what I needed. I couldn't believe the perception of the man.' He rubbed his beard again. Then we talked, and talked. You know what that voice is like – I could have listened to it for hours. We spoke about my work, the problems I was having with making nanotechnology a practical proposition. He seemed to understand so much – he was so sympathetic that I ended up almost crying on his shoulder. I didn't realise until later that he'd actually made some suggestions that I could use.'

'Suggestions about your work?'

He nodded. 'It was – little things. He didn't lay out the answers for me, he just nudged me in the right direction. It wasn't so much what he said, but the way he said it – the nuances. After that party, I drafted the rest of my research paper in two days. My professor said it must have been the Pimms.' He smiled wryly. 'Not at all. I was drunk on ideas.'

'Have you seen the Doctor again since then?'

'He's dropped by a few times. He just turns up at my door, invites himself in and starts talking about nothing much at all.' He smiled fondly. 'Then he goes, and I get to work again.'

'So what happened to change that?'

'To bring me to this, you mean?' Howard said bitterly. He looked up at Mark, and smiled slightly. 'You might as well listen in too – I owe it to you more than I do to her.'

'You don't owe me anything,' said Mark, coming forward and seating himself next to Nyssa. 'But if I can help, I will. You know that much of me by now, I hope.'

Howard didn't reply immediately, waiting instead for a lull in the conversation of the diners behind them.

'I don't know if I can make you understand what it's like – having these ideas, these thoughts. I get them at a gut level – almost like emotions. And once I've had them, I can't imagine a time when they weren't in my head. They don't go away. And that's fine – at least, it was. But the last time the Doctor came, he said something that started me thinking at a tangent, along a path I've never been down before.

That path was dark, so dark, and I got scared. But I couldn't stop the idea, the theory, the applications, forming in my mind. It's all there now, still, and it haunts me. It haunts me that I have this knowledge, and that someone could get at it and use it. I can't allow that. But if I carry on working, I'll have to use what I know. I can't help it. So I had to get away – I should get further away than this. I can't take the responsibility for what might happen if I don't.'

'You're saying that the Doctor drove you to this?' said Nyssa in disbelief.

Howard smiled wearily and rubbed his eyes. They had become startlingly violet, revitalised by the retelling of his story.

'You feel like you're a Chosen one when the Doctor comes to call,' he said sarcastically. 'Don't you think so? You take what he offers you and damn the consequences. I don't for a moment believe he thought he was hurting me; maybe he just underestimated what I could do with the titbits of knowledge he offered. All I know is that I'm walking around with something inside me that could change the whole face of science, and I'm not prepared to let that loose on the world. I had to stop it, and so I had to stop myself. Now no-one cares who I am or what's in my head. They feed me here, they keep me warm, and I'm grateful. Anything more than that is my problem.'

'And the Doctor's too, by the sound of it,' said Mark indignantly. 'He should take some responsibility.'

Howard smiled. 'He was pushing at an open door, Mark. You know me. I've coveted a professorship – hell, I've coveted a Nobel Prize – since I first set foot in Oxford. I knew after our first meeting that the Doctor could help me, if I asked him the right questions and listened hard in the right way. He's a generous-hearted man, and he was delighted when I told him about my papers, my awards. That's why I can't face him now – I can't bear to think that I've let him down.'

'No world is perfect,' said Nyssa gently. 'Cruelty, madness, war – these things get into the most tranquil societies, believe me. It's how we cope with them that shows our true worth.'

Howard shrugged. 'Then maybe I'm a coward. Maybe I'm not man enough to ride out the consequences of my actions.' He rose to his feet. 'But you can tell the Doctor this from me, Nyssa. This isn't his

fault. He opened my mind – stretched it so wide that I could almost feel myself growing. He made me feel more alive than I've ever felt in my life, and I wouldn't have missed that for all the pain in the world. That's what he does, though, isn't it? He picks us up, marks us as his own, and we're never the same again. Some become better, some break, but knowing him changes us all.'

Nyssa had a sudden image of Adric, and had no words to answer him.

'Where are you off to now?' asked Mark as Howard shuffled down the row of chairs to the aisle. 'At least have some more food before you go.'

'No thanks. I want to go and watch the river, and I appreciate it best on an uncluttered stomach. Goodbye, Nyssa. I doubt we'll meet again.'

She watched him as he left the hall, still an imposing figure despite his thinness. For a moment, his long coat swung about him like a robe, his hair seemed darker, and her father was leaving her again. Then it passed, and Duncan Howard was gone.

After a final round of congratulations and a hug from Sue, Mark called a taxi, which carried the two of them back to Northam. Nyssa lugged her case to the foot of Mark's staircase, lowered it to the ground, and turned to face him.

'Well,' said Mark dryly, extricating his room key from his pocket. 'That was a more eventful few hours than I'd bargained for.'

'The Doctor isn't a bad person,' said Nyssa vehemently. 'Sometimes he doesn't think, that's all.'

'Well, he's managed to ruin at least one life by not thinking, at least that's how it seems to me. What's he managed to do to you so far, Nyssa?'

She glared at him, fury and pride etched in every line of her. She thought of her father, gentle Tremas with his burning curiosity, and wondered yet again if anything of him remained in the hatred-ridden Master. If the Doctor hadn't come to Traken, hadn't interfered... the Melkur would have won, with her stepmother's help. The Doctor had saved her world, only for the Master to take first her father and then that same world away.

'The Doctor's risked himself more times than I can name,' she said in a voice throbbing with tears and anger. 'For me, for this planet. I've watched him very nearly die for its sake.'

'And I bet he always has his reasons, and I bet he never explains them to you.' Mark wasn't sneering at her, instead he was pleading. 'Beware of men with subtle motives, Nyssa. You may find yourself against them one day, without ever knowing why. I, on the other hand, am as simple and straightforward as the day is long.' He stretched out his arms to embrace the approaching twilight. 'Okay, bad example, but you know what I'm trying to say.'

Nyssa hesitated, feeling herself pulled by two opposing threads and undecided about which way to fall.

'Believe me, Mark, I'm well aware of how manipulative the Doctor can be when it suits him. But one thing I'm sure of, deep down, is that he acts for good. Always. I would trust him with my life, and he would – has – done the same for me.' She saw again the white, drawn face in the Zero Cabinet, and knew at last which thread she would allow to pull her. 'That's why I want – need – to stay with him. I'm so sorry.'

After an agonising pause, Mark bowed his head. 'He's a fortunate man,' he murmured. 'More so than he deserves. But I can lose as gracefully as the next guy. I've had more practice, after all.'

Then they both heard the sound of voices.

'Damn.' Mark bent down, fumbling with the rucksack. 'Better get these out of sight.'

'Why?'

'It's my neighbours. Coming back from an afternoon in the pub to prepare for an evening in the college bar, I shouldn't wonder.'

His bitterness had returned. Nyssa felt angry with him, and sorry for him, and – something else that she couldn't name. This unknown spirit prompted her to action.

'So, will your neighbours be impressed that you've brought a woman back to your room?' she asked, moving fractionally closer.

'Not if she's just slapped me round the face and stalked off, which is what you looked as though you were about to do a moment ago,' he replied wryly. 'And which, frankly, I deserve.'

The voices were getting closer, almost upon them now.

'How about if she did this instead?' Nyssa reached out, took him by the shoulders and gently drew him to her, tilting her mouth up to meet his. After one dreadful moment when she thought he was going to pull away, his lips parted slightly, and they kissed. Softly, gently, for a few seconds only. Long enough for the group of young men who had just entered the quad to pause and gape at the sight of 'that quiet bloke' kissing a pretty girl directly under the lamp illuminating the staircase hallway.

The kiss over, Nyssa turned her head sideways to gauge their reaction. Judging by the row of heads peering over the ornamental shrub arrangement, it was quite favourable. She looked back at Mark, her eyes sparkling.

'I think we did it,' she whispered conspiratorially. 'They're hooked!'

They both smiled, a smile of recognition, of wry amusement at the situation they found themselves in.

'I think I ought to go now,' she said. 'Before – well, I just think I ought to go.'

'I understand.' He ran his hand lightly along the velvet of her sleeve, making her shiver. 'Well – I don't really, to be honest. I understand there are things about you I can never understand, and I suppose that'll have to do. But you've got to go, I know that much.' He smiled. 'I won't forget you, Nyssa. Even if I wanted to, I simply can't.'

She walked away across the quad, not looking back. That would have been fatal.

Behind her, Mark's neighbours slowly emerged from their vantage point and strolled nonchalantly to meet him.

'Fancy a drink, mate?' asked one of them. 'We'll give you a hand with your bags, if you like.'

'Thanks,' said Mark. 'I'd appreciate that.'

You were right, Nyssa, he thought. Give them what they want, and they'll give me respect. The strongest friendships can be forged on the shallowest of pretexts, after all. But I'd give all that up just to have you here for a little longer.

Nyssa walked past the porter's lodge, glanced through the grimy glass, did a double take, and poked her head around the door. 'What on earth

are you doing?' she asked.

The Doctor rose to his feet, folding up his hat and smiling cautiously, as if he wasn't sure what her reaction would be.

'I found your note,' he said. 'I thought I'd wait here for here. I knew you'd be back eventually.'

'Because I've got nowhere else to go, you mean?'

'No!' He looked hurt. 'Because you wouldn't want me to worry, I hope. Your manners always were impeccable.' He frowned. 'Are you alright? You look tired.'

He put a hand lightly under her elbow and steered her to the door, bidding the porter a cheery farewell. They crossed over the road, and entered the Parks once more.

'I couldn't find Duncan,' said the Doctor as they approached the TARDIS. 'I went to his college, but they said he'd left. I'll have to check the temporal co-ordinates and refine them a little – maybe try again in a few months' time.'

At that moment, she realised she couldn't tell him. She couldn't watch his face as he found out what he'd done to Duncan Howard, and she couldn't tell him about Mark. These were burdens she would have to bear alone.

She forced herself to smile wanly. 'And I was so looking forward to the tea and biscuits,' she said. 'Still, there's always tomorrow. Do you mind if we leave now? I think I need a good night's sleep – I must have had a surfeit of fresh air.' They entered the TARDIS, and she headed towards her room.

'Nyssa.'

She stopped on the threshold of the console room and turned to face him. 'Yes?'

Seeing her in the clean, unforgiving light of the TARDIS, the Doctor was taken aback by how pale and strained she looked. He knew that he should make a clean breast of things, and encourage her to confide in him in her turn.

But his courage failed him. How could he admit what he'd done? He'd agreed to help in the search for her father, only to leave her to watch Traken's destruction. How could he tell her he'd turned down a chance to make things right again? She'd think that he didn't care what

happened to her, when nothing could be further from the truth. She'd think he was fallible, and how many of his companions had stayed with him long after discovering that?

He held his peace. He was a Time Lord; he'd find a way somehow. He always did, didn't he? Maybe it wouldn't be his predecessor's way, but that was all part of living, growing, juggling the personalities within him. He was his own person now.

'You know – you know you can talk to me, don't you?' he stammered. 'Whatever it is – I might just be able to help.'

He looked so vulnerable that Nyssa wanted to hug him.

'I'm fine,' she said. 'I just miss Tegan, that's all. Don't worry about me.' Her hand touched the smooth surface of a juggling ball in her pocket and she smiled, more strongly this time. 'I'll be fine.'

Mind Over Matter

David J. Howe

MEDICATION

Steve Jordan knew he was going to die. He could feel it in his bones.

He had been in the back of the car for about half an hour now, not that he could really tell how much time had passed, what with his being blindfolded and crushed down behind the front seats and all. The men with their feet resting on him kept nudging him and laughing, and one of them took delight in opening and closing a flick-knife right by his ear. He flinched every time and the men laughed some more.

Jordan trembled as he felt the car swing round another corner and skid to a stop. Silence as the engine was turned off and the loud, thumping rap music was quietened abruptly.

Footsteps. Car doors opening. Laughing.

Then Jordan felt himself roughly pulled to his feet and propelled through the car door. He hit his head on the side of the door and fell to the gritty tarmac in a stunned daze.

'Come on... wakey wakey.'

Jordan shook his head as an inquisitive shoe prodded him in the leg.

He sat up and groped for his head. His hand touched something sticky and he winced as he pulled the blindfold off. It was bloody on one side.

He screwed up his eyes in sudden pain as three bright lights snapped on, right in his face.

'You've been a naughty boy,' said one of the men. 'A very naughty boy.'

Jordan raised his hand to block the torchlight shining in his face. 'I don't know what you mean,' he stammered. 'Who are you?'

One of the men laughed. A throaty chuckle that started somewhere in the lungs and emerged caked in tar and phlegm. 'Aww, he wants to know who we are...'

A blur of movement and a steel-reinforced toecap cannoned into

Jordan's left kneecap sending blistering shards of pain up his leg and into his stomach. He screamed a hoarse, shrill cry and clutched his knee, tears squeezing from his eyes as the pain flared and tore through him.

'Shall we tell him, boys?'

One of the lights bobbed closer and waved in front of Jordan's face. The torchlight gleamed off Jordan's tears as a big hand grasped the front of his shirt and a blast of last night's curry and garlic wafted over his face. The man's features were briefly illuminated revealing a broken nose and a scar running across his left cheek.

'We're from Mr Richards,' the man whispered, and abruptly let go of Jordan's shirt.

Richards. Now Jordan knew he was really in trouble. Richards ran one of the crime syndicates in the area, a syndicate which had been steadily making headway against the rival attentions of Big Al. And Jordan worked for Al.

At least that's how Al saw it. From Jordan's point of view he had been given an offer he could not refuse. Either his girlfriend had some unplanned cosmetic surgery done to her face, or Jordan did Al a few favours. The reasonableness of this deal had been revealed to Jordan when his mother's pet dog turned up one day on his doorstep. It had been nailed there.

From that point on, Jordan did favours for Al. Taking a package here. Moving a car from one garage to another. Nothing big, nothing nasty, but enough to make Jordan generally scared for his life and for the lives of everyone he loved.

'Richards...' Jordan gulped. 'Richards... but... what...?' He flinched as a light suddenly swung in again and tapped him sharply on the side of his head.

'*Mr* Richards...' the voice admonished. '*Mr* Richards wants you to stay out of his way.'

Jordan shifted on the ground and tried to get his legs under him. His knee felt like it was five times its normal size and ached and throbbed. Just as he got his balance, one of the men stepped close and pushed Jordan back on his heels and over onto his backside again. They

laughed.

Jordan pushed backwards away from the lights, sliding on his backside across the loose tarmac.

He flicked a look round him, but could not make out much aside from some shadowy trees silhouetted against the night sky, and some looming buildings over to the right.

The men and their torches stayed where they were.

'So what should we do, Jordan?' one of them asked sarcastically. 'How can we get you to stay out of *Mr* Richards's way?'

'I promise,' said Jordan, fresh tears coursing down his face in pain and terror. 'I... promise...'

The man with the lung condition laughed again, hawked and spat a gobbet of mucus at the ground in front of Jordan's feet. 'Promises...? *Mr* Richards isn't interested in promises. He wants a cast iron certainty.'

The three torches clicked off one by one, and Jordan was left looking at three man-shaped shadows. He blinked the lights out of his eyes and shuffled backwards a little further.

The men stayed where they were.

Jordan pushed on the ground with his hands and shakily got to his feet. His knee nearly gave out under him as he accidentally put weight on it and he stood there shaking and trying to keep his balance as his leg threatened to pull him over.

He looked around again.

'That's right Jordan. Nowhere to run.'

Jordan started as he heard the unmistakable clean *snick* of a flick knife being opened. One of the men stepped forward.

'So what's it to be Jordan? Are you just going to stand there, or are we gonna have some *fun* giving you some medicine?'

Jordan looked round again, and then turned and started to hobble off to the right, towards the indistinct shapes of buildings. As his night sight started to return, he saw that the ground was littered with bricks and other debris, almost as though there had been an explosion here at some point in the past.

Behind him he heard the men muttering to themselves and then

laughing.

'Go on Jordan... We'll give you a head start. Nowhere to run out here anyway...'

Jordan hobble-ran anyway, across a flat strip of tarmac and abruptly came to a halt at the edge of what could only be described as a crater. The lip vanished into darkness at either side, and the bottom of it could barely be seen, lighter objects glinting in what little light was being reflected from the clouds. Jordan realised that they must have driven him out to an abandoned air base some way down towards the South coast which had been closed for several years after a massive explosion had ripped through it. Jordan had vague memories of seeing something on the news about it. Something about an unauthorised nuclear test or maybe the explosion of an experimental aircraft.

Jordan skirted round it, looking back towards the car where the three men were standing illuminated by the car's headlights. They watched his progress, and Jordan realised that there really was nowhere to run, and that they could simply wait until he – or they – tired of this game, and then came to find him.

Further round the lip of the crater, Jordan saw that he was closer to the buildings and so he moved towards the scarred wall. A dark opening in the wall resolved itself as a doorway, and Jordan pulled his way through and into the inky black interior, his feet crunching on stones and glass from the shattered windows.

Outside all was silent, but it would not be long before the three thugs came for him. Jordan reached out his hand and felt for the wall. Slowly he edged his way round the large room, shuffling and limping so as to favour his injured knee. He came to another opening and made his way into another room. The scant light from outside glinted off shattered furniture and broken windows.

In the centre of the room, Jordan spotted what looked like a handrail, and an even blacker area beyond it. Stairs? Leading down?

He made his way across the room and gently limped down into the sunken stairwell. Suddenly his foot came down on something soft and he paused. He swept his hand down by his feet and his fingers encountered matted fur. An animal of some sort. Lying dead on the steps. He made a face and shuffled further down the steps. His foot

kicked at another soft object which thudded down a couple of steps. Then there was another. What was this?

When he reached the bottom, his questing fingers found the edge of a door, slightly ajar, and he pulled it open. He felt, rather than saw several small animal bodies, many no more than bags of bones, pushed aside as the door opened. Then he made his way through the door and gently pulled it closed behind him.

He slumped down to the floor with his back to the closed door. Would he be found here? It was so dark, maybe not, but then they had the advantage, torches and perfect kneecaps. Jordan bent his knees, wincing at the pain, and lowered his head to them.

Go further in.

Maybe. But it was so dark.

Go further in.

Something tugged at his mind. Maybe he should go further in. The animals outside the door had been stuck there, lacking the required abilities to actually open the door. But he had opened the door and he could go further in.

He struggled to his feet and limped two steps into the room. It was pitch black and silent. Jordan stared into the blackness as if he could somehow call light into existence by the force of his will. He shuffled another step. And another.

That's right. Come further in. Come closer.

Jordan moved another step, and another. Then he stopped. Puzzled.

He could hear something.

A low throbbing sound. Pulsing rhythmically. He shook his head to try and clear it but the noise remained. The throbbing was gentle and persistent. Lulling and hypnotic. Jordan took another step and stopped again.

Come closer.

The feeling was irresistible and Jordan had no choice but to take one final step.

The pulsing and throbbing sound grew louder and Jordan screwed up his face in pain as he felt a tearing, pulling sensation ripping through his head. He fell to his knees, unmindful of his smashed kneecap, and

screamed out as his head was filled with the pulsing noise.

The pain stopped when Jordan died.

SPECIAL

The UNIT officer saluted smartly as the three men entered the room. Two were dressed in smart uniform; one a Brigadier, the other sported the stripes of a Regimental Sergeant Major. The third man was somewhat more casually dressed. A battered brown felt hat perched precariously on top of a head of brown curly hair, and a long multi-coloured scarf was draped around the man's shoulders in a manner that suggested that it had been casually flung there, but had decided to stay. A long, comfortable-looking coat covered baggy corduroy trousers and a tartan waistcoat.

'I really don't know why you've called me back again Brigadier,' the eccentrically dressed man boomed, his eyes twinkling at the others, 'I gave you specific instructions that I was only to be summoned in an emergency...'

'This is an emergency, Doctor,' sighed the Brigadier with a glance at RSM Benton, his number two. 'Of course we wouldn't use your... your...' The Brigadier glanced at Benton who shrugged unhelpfully. '… your device, without due cause…'

'And I'm very pleased to hear it...' completed the Doctor. 'Now... as long as I'm here,' the Doctor's voice fell an octave, 'there are grave matters to discuss.'

'There are?' asked a surprised Brigadier. The Doctor was UNIT's erstwhile scientific adviser, who came and went as be pleased, and yet always seemed to turn up when things really started to look bleak. The Brigadier and Benton had known him for years, and he had proved himself a trusted ally. When the Doctor was worried, it was time to *really* worry.

The Doctor nodded sagely. 'There are...' he intoned. 'Why is there no tea?'

The Brigadier looked at the Doctor, then at the table and then at Benton. He shook his head in exasperation. 'No... tea... oh very well.' He gestured to the officer standing at the door. 'Pot of tea for three,

Perkins, on the double.'

'And don't forget the Garibaldi biscuits,' rumbled the Doctor as the somewhat startled Perkins headed off. He liked Garibaldi biscuits. 'Now, Brigadier, what's all this about your men running amok?'

Benton placed a file of papers on the table, and the Brigadier selected a black and white photograph from the pile. 'Strangest thing. Groves, one of our operatives. Doing a little hush-hush surveillance on one of the gangs that have been sniffing around our communications base in the South.' He placed the photograph on the table, and tapped it with his finger. 'There.'

The Doctor peered down at the image. It showed a riot in progress, and the man the Brigadier had just pointed out was busy with a hammer. The man he was using it on seemed pretty upset. The Doctor narrowed his eyes.

'Groves was one of our best men,' continued the Brigadier. 'Then, nothing. No word. No contact. Nothing. Then he was spotted out with the gang, running riot, apparently without a care in the world as to whether he would be seen or not. We've tried to contact him, but it seems he doesn't want to know.'

The Brigadier looked at the Doctor meaningfully. 'And he's the third man that this has happened to.'

'The third?' The Doctor looked at the photograph thoughtfully. 'And no word...'

The Doctor looked up at the Brigadier and Benton. 'And you want me to sort this out for you...?'

'Well... that was the general idea,' said the Brigadier with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. 'If it's not too much trouble, that is. More importantly is the threat to the communications base. It's where we have our global transmitters housed, as well as some of the more sensitive objects we've accumulated over the years. Dalek casings, weapons, Nestene spheres... that sort of thing. By the way... isn't there anyone with you at the moment? What happened to Sarah Jane?'

The Doctor gazed at the Brigadier. 'At the moment I am travelling alone,' he said. 'Sarah went home. I'm getting to quite enjoy my own company.'

The Brigadier nodded, not really understanding at all.

'First things first,' boomed the Doctor, removing his hat from his head and settling down in one of the chairs. 'Where's that tea?'

PUSH IT

'There's something about this place,' commented the Doctor mildly to Benton as he drove him round where the last riots had taken place.

Benton steered the car around another smouldering vehicle and smiled. The Doctor certainly had a way with words. He negotiated some piles of broken glass and bricks and headed off back towards the UNIT operations base. 'Any thoughts, Doctor?' he asked.

'Mmm. Several. And none of them very nice,' murmured the Doctor blackly. They had toured the area as if the Doctor was just sightseeing. Shattered cars and buildings. Broken windows, boarded up houses. Poverty. The Doctor had seen all this before. The failure of government he mused. Letting the people go to hell to satisfy their own sense of superiority. Pathetic. Just then a movement caught his eye. 'Slow down Benton.'

The car halted by an alleyway where the sounds of scuffling and shouting could be heard. The Doctor leaped from the car, and with a curt instruction to Benton to stay where he was, the Doctor headed into the alley.

Before him was a strange sight. A woman, perhaps in her early twenties, was hanging on for dear life to a man of around the same age. She was crying and pleading with him to stop, but the man's face was expressionless as he struggled with her. As the Doctor approached, the woman lost her grip and was thrown to the ground by the man. He started jogging off down the alley away from the Doctor. Scrambling to her feet, the woman launched herself at the man and pushed him over, knocking him flying. She scrambled on top of him and sat on his back.

'Are you all right? We heard you from the road,' called the Doctor.

'I'm just fine,' spat the woman, pushing a strand of her blonde hair away from her eyes.

The Doctor came closer and looked down at the man who was sprawled on the road, unmoving. 'Hello?' he said cheerily. The man

ignored him, staring off into space. The Doctor frowned and looked closer. 'I think,' he said, 'I think maybe you can get off now.'

The woman bridled at the suggestion. 'What, after all the trouble I've been to? He's not getting away from me now.'

The Doctor blinked at her. 'I know. I think he's dead.'

DUMB

The Doctor poured a cup of tea for the woman and handed it to her. She took it listlessly.

'How are you feeling now?' asked the Brigadier, who was hovering in the background with Benton as the Doctor played mother. The Doctor glanced at him and then switched on one of his million watt smiles for the woman. 'I'm the Doctor... and you are?'

'Sue Mackenzie,' she looked up at the Doctor and offered a wan smile.

'Why don't you tell us what happened, miss?' asked Benton. 'It must have been quite a shock for you.'

Sue sighed and started to explain the events of the last few days. The man she had been struggling with was her boyfriend ('ex-boyfriend' she corrected herself), a somewhat unstable guy called Jack Clark. All had been fine until about a week ago when Jack had not bothered to come home. Then she had seen him on TV, rioting with the other gang members, and had headed out to try and find him – he had told her earlier that he had been offered an appointment working for a haulage company down south, so a quick look through the telephone book furnished the address. She had found the place, and had even found him, but he was not there – it was Jack's body, she tried to explain, but it was as though someone had switched all the lights off. There was no-one home. He was like a big dumb baby.

Sue had followed him back towards town and he had made no protests when Sue had pulled him away from the rioting to try and get him to see reason, but suddenly, he had come to life, lashing out at her and struggling like a caged animal. Then the Doctor had arrived and he knew the rest.

Sue looked at the Doctor and sized him up. She was used to men

being a little overbearing, and over the years she had learned to look after herself. That's what growing up on a South London housing estate did for you. You had to take the knocks and roll with them. But the Doctor was a bit of an enigma. She had the Brigadier marked down from the moment she first saw him: military man. Bit of a misogynist at heart, but also fiercely loyal. He'd never have a wife because he was married already... to his job. Benton seemed nice, though, if a little dim, but the Doctor intrigued her. Here was an intensely attractive man, wild and unkempt, but with a keen intelligence, who knew just how to get what he wanted. But she sensed something more and had no idea what it might be.

The Doctor nodded sagely. 'So where was he when you found him…? Could you show me?'

Sue shrugged. 'I can show you,' she said, 'but I don't know what good it will do him.'

The Brigadier asked Benton to fetch a map and they waited in silence for him to return. Sue sipped her tea and studied the Doctor over the rim of the mug. He seemed at ease, and yet there was a wildness hiding behind his eyes. She shrugged to herself. She wasn't sure why she was feeling so attracted to this stranger – especially when Jack had just died. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't bring herself to feel any remorse. Perhaps it was because she'd only been seeing him for a couple of months, and even then she had never been sure herself what she saw in him. He had been totally confident and lippy, all mouth and trousers as her mum used to say. Laddish to the extreme. He treated her with a kind of casual contempt that typified his attitude. She was there to look good, and to keep quiet.

He was a bit of a bastard, actually, Sue realised with a start. If all this hadn't happened, how long would she have given the relationship? Another month? A week? They'd been drifting apart ever since they met through a drunken haze at a mutual friend's party. No wonder she couldn't get all worked up about his death.

The Doctor saw her looking at him and smiled sadly, his huge eyes reflecting nothing but warmth and compassion. I'm going to find out more about my gallant knight, she reflected to herself. Maybe have

some fun into the bargain?

There was a knock on the door and Benton entered carrying an Ordnance Survey map of the south of England. He spread the map out on the table, using the cups and biscuit plate to hold down the comers.

Sue stood and peered down at the map. She found some familiar landmarks, and traced her finger down until it rested over an area roughly mid-way between London and Brighton.

'Here,' she said. 'This is where that haulage company HQ is.'

The Doctor and the Brigadier looked closer, and then looked at each other.

'Stanham. Does that place bring back any memories Brigadier?'

The Brigadier frowned. 'We've been to so many places, Doctor. Alderley, Nuton, Wenley Moor...'

'Think, Brigadier, think... abandoned airfield, Sussex. Large explosion?'

The Brigadier stared at the Doctor, and then, at the same moment, the two men's eyes widened. 'Stangmoor,' whispered the Brigadier, his eyes moving to locate a large prison complex marked on the map around ten miles from where Sue's finger still rested. 'The missile... The Master!'

'Exactly, Brigadier. Exactly.'

'So you think the Master's back...?' began the Brigadier, but the Doctor shook his head.

'Not this time. He was using an alien parasite to drain the evil from men's minds, and I think that maybe the final explosion didn't entirely destroy our parasitic visitor as I'd hoped, and instead it's managed to find new hosts.'

'Hosts?'

'Yes. Hosts, Brigadier. And if I'm right – and I invariably am – this is just the tip of the iceberg.'

'Excuse me,' Sue waved her hand between the two men's faces. 'Is this a private conversation, or will you explain what you're talking about?'

The Brigadier gave her a cursory glance. 'Classified, I'm afraid, miss. Sorry.'

Sue turned her attention to the Doctor and gave him one of her

pleading looks. The Doctor looked a little embarrassed.

'It's a little hard to explain, um, Sue,' he began. He glanced at the Brigadier who had one of his don't-you-give-anything-away expressions on his face. 'A few years back, the Brigadier and his men had a run in with... with an international criminal called the Master, who set off an explosion here,' he indicated the map. 'There were... other complications, and I'm very much afraid that we might not have seen the end of it as we hoped.'

The Brigadier seemed satisfied by this, and started rolling up the map. He was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door and the sight of Perkins clutching a sheaf of papers. 'Brigadier? Medical report for you.' He handed the papers to the Brigadier who flicked through them before pausing with a puzzled look on his face.

'You say... this Jack Clark started struggling and you had to stop him?'

Sue nodded and indicated the Doctor. 'He saw us.'

The Brigadier looked at the Doctor. 'Interesting,' he said, 'when you consider that the cause of death appears to be the removal of a large part of the man's brain.'

WICKED WAYS

The Doctor was worried. After the Brigadier had shown him the medical reports, and combined with the realisation of where all this seemed to be centred, he had started to get an inkling of what might be going on. Now, later that evening, crouched in the darkness by some bushes outside the large compound at Stanham which had once been a small air-strip but which was currently the base of operations for this mysterious haulage company, he felt in the pit of his stomach that his worries were on the verge of being confirmed.

In front of him was a row of low huts and before that was a large crater, blasted there some years before when the Master's plan to use a nuclear powered rocket to hold the world to ransom backfired on him. Stunted grass and shrubbery clung tenaciously to the crater's walls, while the old tarmac was littered with broken glass and bricks, still lying where they had been thrown.

The Doctor edged closer, his feet crunching on the grit and debris. The scene was brightly lit by several arc-lamps that had been set up around the perimeter of the base, and as the Doctor watched, a lorry edged its way up to one of the huts and stopped. There was no activity, but the Doctor frowned as he heard a low throbbing sound for a few moments. Then the lorry drove off, apparently not having loaded or unloaded anything.

The Doctor quietly made his way down to the ring of lights and, looking all round, crouched and ran towards the nearest building. He pressed himself against the wall and slid along, stopping when he was hidden between the hut and a dead and blackened tree trunk emerging from the ground just in front of it.

Another lorry approached, and the Doctor raised his head high enough to peer in through a window. Inside, the room was piled with crates around the edge and a single lightbulb in the centre cast shadows from three thickset men, all dressed in business suits, standing facing the wall towards which the lorry was backing up. The lorry stopped and its engine was killed. The Doctor could hear the heated metal ticking in the sudden silence.

Then there was that noise again, a low pulsing throbbing sound which penetrated the Doctor's mind and set all manner of familiar alarm bells ringing. As he watched, the floor inside the hut started to ripple as if seen through a heat haze, and a selection of wooden pallets and crates suddenly faded into view. The pulsing noise peaked and was then silenced. The Doctor blinked. The lorry started its engine and pulled away, its goods delivered.

The Doctor slumped to the ground outside the hut and, pulling his hat off with one hand, jammed his other through his curly hair, pushing it away from his forehead. 'The Brigadier's not going to like this...' he mumbled. 'Not going to like it at all.'

I THINK I'M PARANOID

'I don't like this at all, Doctor,' said the Brigadier the next morning, the sense of threat in his words apparent. 'Not at all. *Teleportation*? Are you *sure*?'

'I told you you wouldn't like it, Brigadier,' said the Doctor, his fingers twitching over a plate of toast and marmalade.

The Brigadier sighed, exasperated with the Doctor. 'So what are we going to do about it? Send some troops in?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Look what happened last time. Half of them never came back and were later seen actively participating in the violence. I don't like violence,' he mused before dramatically tearing a slice of toast in half and cramming it in his mouth.

'What can we do, Doctor? If we can't send in the troops… an air strike?'

The Doctor swallowed his toast and sipped his tea thoughtfully. 'Too many lives would be lost, and that area of Sussex is a lot more populated than it was back then.' He tapped his teaspoon rhythmically against the side of the mug.

'What we need is more information,' he continued. 'What its plans are, where it will strike next.'

The Doctor nodded. Then he had a sudden thought. 'What happened to that girl, Sue?'

The Brigadier looked flustered for a moment 'No idea. Benton?' Benton entered the room from his post outside.

'Sir?'

'Any idea where that young lady went?'

Benton nodded. 'She left early this morning,' he said. 'She said you'd agreed she could stay the night, and I showed her to the sleeping quarters. Saw her first thing, and then she left, saying that you'd asked her to get something for you, sir.'

The Brigadier frowned. '"Get something for…" Oh no.'

The Doctor looked quizzically at the Brigadier. 'What Brigadier?'

'After you left, Doctor, I stayed talking with Benton as to the best way to tackle this, and one of the things we discussed needing was more information about what was happening down at the old air-base. We knew that's where you had gone, but Sue didn't know that...'

Benton looked doubtful. 'She wouldn't go there, though would she sir?'

The Doctor swept his hat up off the table and jammed it onto his head. 'Come on Benton!'

HAMMERING IN MY HEAD

After driving slowly round the compound, Benton and the Doctor eventually spotted Sue hiding in the bushes, fairly close to where the Doctor had been the night before. The Doctor leaped from, the car and hurried over to her.

'Are you all right?' he asked, casting a glance back to where Benton was waiting by the car.

'Oh I'm just fine,' said Sue with a bright smile. 'Thought I'd see if I could find anything out about this place, something to help the Brigadier.'

She stood up and dusted down her blue jeans, holding onto the Doctor's arm as she picked a stone out of the sole of her right trainer.

The Doctor frowned. 'You have no idea how dangerous this place is. Come on.'

They started to walk back towards Benton's car but a movement to the left caught the Doctor's eye, and he turned to see one of the suited men walking across the littered tarmac towards them. He swung his head and saw two more men making their way from other directions.

'Benton! Move!' shouted the Doctor, and turned to face the men who were rapidly approaching, albeit at a walking pace. Behind him, the Doctor heard the engine start and Benton drive off in a screech of tyres and a cloud of dust. He composed his face for the confrontation, and made sure that he was standing in front of Sue.

As the men approached, he beamed at them. 'Hello! I'm so glad you've come. You see my friend and I are lost and we could do with some help.'

Silently, one of the men, an ugly brute with a big scar on his left cheek, roughly took hold of the Doctor's arm and started to lead him towards the huts. Sue followed with her own escort.

'Steady,' commented the Doctor. 'We're happy to come along. Any chance of a nice cup of tea?'

He shot a disarming grin back at Sue who just looked unhappily back at him. The Doctor sighed. The Brigadier had wanted more information, and now it seemed he was going to get it the hard way.

The group entered the huts and walked along several corridors. The Doctor peeked through doors and windows as they passed and saw piles of electrical equipment, transmitters and receivers. There were also groups of people – the rioters the Doctor supposed – just standing staring into space. Looking for all the world like showroom dummies.

The Doctor, Sue and their escorts eventually reached an office at the end of one of the corridors. There, they were pushed into the centre of the room and released, their escorts standing silent and motionless around them.

The Doctor leaned over to one of them, 'Don't say much, do you?' The man gazed impassively ahead, his eyes glassy. The Doctor prodded him in the arm, but there was no reaction.

Suddenly, a door opened at the other side of the room and another man entered. He was slightly built and also wore a suit. His eyes were covered with sunglasses, despite the gloom of the room, but the most worrying thing about him was his face and hands. The skin was split and grey, and the white bones of his fingers and cheeks could be seen through the splits. He stood and eyed the Doctor and Sue silently.

Sue thought he looked totally evil. Like one of those grainy newspaper photographs of Dennis Nilson or Peter Sutcliffe: men who seemed to exude evil and hate through their image alone. She shuddered and sidled closer to the Doctor.

'What do you want?' the stranger asked mildly, his voice hissing and wheezing as his breath escaped through the holes in his cheeks and throat.

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Well... we were lost and just stopped to ask directions, but I can see you're a very busy man, and so we'll not trouble you any longer and be on our way...'

The Doctor turned and started towards the door, Sue following behind. Her hands found one end of his scarf and gripped it tightly. One of the silent men stepped sideways to block the door.

'Good,' continued the Doctor enthusiastically, swinging round to face the front again. 'We'll stay. Will there be tea?'

The man with the ruined face and hands stepped forward, his breath sweet and rotting. 'Most people are afraid of me,' he commented. 'But you are not. Why are you not afraid?'

Sue shrank back as he turned his gaze on her, and whimpered slightly. The Doctor continued to look levelly at the man.

'Who were you?' he asked. 'Before this happened? Is there any of you left?'

The man swivelled his head to look at the Doctor. 'I am the boss,' he stated simply. 'I have always been the boss.'

He turned and sat on the desk at the other side of the office. 'If you mean what was my name, it's not important. What is important is that you should be very afraid of me. Very afraid indeed.'

As the boss spoke, so the Doctor faintly heard the familiar throbbing sound. Gentle and persistent. He turned to Sue and spoke quietly and quickly. 'Something's going to happen. Something which will be very frightening, but it's all just illusions. Remember it's all an illusion.' He pulled back as Sue was abruptly engulfed in sheets of flame. In the Doctor's mind, he was caught in the middle of an inferno, which suddenly shifted to an image of himself, dressed in the robes of the senior Time Lords, aiming a staser rifle at the Lord President of the Time Lords. Betrayal, assassination, death, a failure to succeed. All these emotions washed over the Doctor to the backdrop of the gentle throbbing sound. He dimly heard Sue cry out, and flailed with his hands to try and grasp her.

He heard a cackling voice and an image of the Master appeared, wizened and blackened. An evil, vengeful troll come to drag him down to the centre of the earth to perish in fire and pain. 'You're right Doctor,' cackled the voice. 'You have failed.'

The Doctor braced himself against the mental attack, and threw up defences. He felt a raging force battering against him, and the pulsing noise intensified.

Sue was terrified. She had suddenly found herself standing on the very edge of a tall building. She looked down and saw the ground spiralling away from her, thousands of feet below. A gust of wind plucked at her, and her feet shuffled on the very edge. She was too high and she was going to fall...

Then there were insects running all over her. Inside and outside her clothing. Ants and snails, woodlice and earwigs, spiders with bloated bellies scuttled through her hair. She screamed and plucked and patted

herself, trying to dislodge the unwelcome visitors. The creatures were trampled underfoot, and wasps buzzed around her bare legs, swinging ever closer in their attempts to land on her flesh.

She heard a voice in her head. 'Do you want it to stop? I can make it stop.'

'Yes!' she screamed silently. 'Yes... make it stop! Anything, but make it stop!'

She did not feel a thing as a sliver of pulsing black matter materialised in her frontal lobe, nestling in her brain. A sense of well being came over her, and she knew that she had been wrong all along, that the boss was really in charge, and that she only had to obey and all would be well. The destroyed part of her brain had controlled the elements of free will and obedience, and now she could do nothing but obey the whispered commands her new master was pouring into her mind.

The Doctor felt the pressure and pounding on his mind ease, and he cracked open his eyes to see the boss sitting on the table calmly. The flames and images had gone, and the pulsing sound faded away. He turned to check Sue who was looking round with fear and amazement. He smiled briefly at her.

'Are you afraid now?' asked the boss mildly, looking at the Doctor curiously.

The Doctor nodded expressively. 'Oh yes, we're afraid. Aren't we,' he looked encouragingly at Sue who, after a moment, nodded back, her eyes wide.

The man stood and leaned towards the Doctor. 'You're a very interesting man, Doctor. So remember that feeling,' he hissed before turning and leaving the room through the door he had entered by. The other men in suits also turned and left the room.

The Doctor let out a sigh. 'Well. That was fun. We must go on outings like this more often, eh?'

Sue realised she was still holding the end of the Doctor's scarf and dropped it. 'What happened, Doctor?' she asked. 'There were insects and I...'

The Doctor shushed her. 'Don't worry. They were just illusions. Nothing to worry about and all gone now.'

He went to the door and opened it a crack. No-one was in sight.

'It looks like we're free to go,' he said. 'Come on.'

They made their way back along the corridors and out to the main exit, where they headed away from the complex. Looking back, the Doctor could not see a soul, and wondered why they had just been allowed to leave. There was something going on here, something he was missing, but what...?

Sue also looked back, her mind in turmoil. Now that she had met her master, she would do all she could to keep him happy. And foremost was his unspoken request in her mind for information about the Doctor and what actions he was planning. She would obey and do what she could.

They turned and started the long walk back along the roads to the nearest town.

SLEEP TOGETHER

'I just can't let you do it, Doctor,' shouted the Brigadier, banging his fist on the workbench.

The Doctor blinked up at him like a guilty schoolboy. 'Brigadier,' he began in a tone that suggested that arguing was going to do no good, 'if you send in troops there will be mass slaughter. The only chance is for me to work out some way of isolating the creature, and then to get it away from Earth where it can do no damage.'

'But, Doctor, those are good men in there. We have to do something to try and rescue them.'

'And end up with a pile of brainless corpses? They're already dead, Brigadier!'

The Brigadier shuffled uneasily and changed the subject. 'So what *are* you going to do?'

The Doctor gestured around the room, which was piled with electrical components of all types. From printed circuits to gutted radio sets and boxes full of valves and resistors. 'Your men did a good job of collecting all this together...'

The Brigadier nodded and jammed his swagger stick under his armpit in satisfaction. 'It's what you've always said, Doctor, “be

prepared”. After that last bit of nonsense, we decided to create a store for all those bits and bobs you're always dashing off for.' He picked up an old alarm clock and briefly examined it before the Doctor took it off him and sheepishly slipped it into one of his pockets.

'Wondered where that had got to,' he mumbled with a smile at the Brigadier.

The Doctor clapped his hands together, and rubbed them vigorously. Then, like a child in a sweetshop, he started rummaging through the shelves and boxes, selecting components with interested ums and ahs, and discarding others with a frown. After a moment or two, he looked up to where the Brigadier and Sue were standing watching him.

'I'm going to be very busy for a time,' he told them. 'Our enemy has been collecting equipment for transmission of energy. It may be planning to spread itself around a little, and I need to come up with something to prevent that. Don't you have somewhere you should be? Some men to shout at Brigadier, eh?'

The Brigadier harrumphed. 'Well we'll leave you to it then, Doctor.'

As the Brigadier showed Sue out of the room, the Doctor followed and gently closed the door behind them. Then, he sat on the wooden chair beside the table, pulled his hat so it covered eyes, and leaned back on the hind legs of the chair, his booted feet resting on the table.

Shortly, gentle snoring could be heard coming from the room, but the Brigadier, ever tactful, decided to let sleeping Doctors lie... at least for the moment.

WHEN I GROW UP

On leaving the Doctor, the Brigadier had instructed Sue in no uncertain terms that she should now leave. The UNIT base was a secure operation and her presence could not be permitted for any longer, but he was grateful for her help in this matter. She had only been allowed back in because she was with the Doctor, and one part of the Brigadier's mind expected the Doctor to have a pretty young girl in tow. However now she should leave things to UNIT and the Doctor, and try to rebuild her life, forgetting about anything she may have seen. She was escorted to the front reception by Benton, who sheepishly gave

her a leaflet containing details of counselling which she could call upon should she need it, and bade her farewell.

Outside the building, Sue walked until she was out of sight of the entrance. She then stopped and slumped with her back against a wall. She was confused and a little scared. Her head ached somewhat, and the whispered commands from her master resumed. The parasite in her brain commended her on a job well done, and with a faint throbbing, pulsing noise, grew fractionally larger, robbing Sue of the power of independent thought. It jerked her to her feet and walked her body to the nearest shop where she asked if they could call a taxi for her as she was feeling unwell and needed to get home.

The taxi arrived, but Sue gave instructions to be taken to the air-base. There, she robotically paid the driver then turned and entered the complex of hangars and huts. She stumbled over some rocks and bruised her ankle, but she couldn't feel any pain. Anything that remained of Sue was battened down severely by the parasite, which had extended tendrils through her cerebral cortex to touch and control every aspect of her body.

When she arrived at the office where the Doctor had confronted the boss, a voice in her head commanded her to hurry. She was walked across the room and into the rear room.

The sight that confronted her did not move her an inch. The boss was slumped in a chair by the desk. His skin had turned to liquid jelly, and his hair had fallen out leaving a balding, glistening pate, through which could be seen his skull. One of his eyes had slipped from its socket and now hung by a thread on his cheek, and the whole skeletal frame was hunched with no muscle strength to support it.

The parasite directed her body closer, and as she approached, so the gentle rhythmic pulsing sound started up again. The body of the boss slipped and clattered to the floor, a mess of loose bone, and liquefied, rotting tissue. Within Sue's cranium, what remained of her brain was absorbed and replaced by the black shape of the main body of be parasite. Jordan's body had been useful to get it to this stage, but the Doctor was a danger. He had been able to shield his mind from the onslaught of the creature's power, and the parasite was feeling distinctly uneasy about it. It remembered another man called the

Doctor. A white-haired scientist who, along with the Brigadier, had caused it to be starved of energy before. Could this be the same man? The parasite knew little about humans, but Sue's memory confirmed that the Brigadier seemed to think that this was the same person. So be it.

With the information gained from Sue's unwilling brain as it was absorbed, it knew the Doctor was working on something to try and stop it, and it knew that without a constant supply of emotion and fear – loosely categorised as 'evil' by the Master and the others who had kept it fed – it would cease to be. After the explosion, it had survived by drawing small animals to it and feeding off their primitive emotions, but when Jordan had been delivered to it, the sudden rush of fear, terror and pain had given it enough of a boost to teleport itself into the man's head, taking control of all his motor functions, and allowing it to walk abroad once more. One of its first acts had been to enslave the other men who were chasing Jordan.

But the process had been faulty, and Jordan's body, already dead by the time the parasite had gained full control, had started to decay rapidly. As the creature drew on every particle of energy it could to make the jump, even the electronic signals between molecules had been stopped. The result: total cellular breakdown. After six months, there was not much left, its power was dwindling and the decay had speeded up rapidly over the last twenty-four hours.

The others the creature had enslaved were simple puppets, mindless extensions of the main parasite, but with Sue's body, it had been more careful. It did not need to disrupt the very essence of life, and so her body was not dead. She had become literally a living corpse. An organic survival suit for the parasite that now lived within her head. Maybe now it could find the means of feeding on this planet, growing and surviving; maybe even gaining proper access to the UNIT facilities and spreading its influence still further.

Sue's body raised its hands to its face and studied them. As the parasite slowly gained control of all the functions, it opened her mouth and cackled.

'This time, Doctor, it will not be so easy.'

THE TRICK IS TO KEEP BREATHING

As dawn broke, five UNIT trucks rumbling up the track and through the broken wire fence broke the silence around the abandoned air base. The trucks stopped and numerous UNIT soldiers jumped out and started setting up barriers of barbed wire and sand-filled bags. Other men hurriedly assembled tripod-mounted machine guns, while others stood in lines and presented arms to officers who walked up and down inspecting them.

Into this frenzied but efficient activity drove a UNIT staff car, from which emerged the Brigadier and the Doctor.

The Brigadier allowed his gaze to run over his men and he smiled proudly. 'Soon have it all set up,' he said. 'Make the place nice and secure.'

The Doctor nodded distractedly. 'Mmm,' he murmured. 'Where's...?'

At that moment, Perkins ran up and saluted the Brigadier. 'Doctor's equipment, Sir!'

'Ah.' The Doctor followed Perkins to another lorry, and opened the tarpaulin flaps at the rear. He reached in and brought out a ring of twisted wires, valves and lightbulbs. From it trailed a pair of wires, and these he unwound and gave to Perkins.

He then grabbed another similar device from the back of the lorry, and headed off towards the hangars with them. Perkins trotted behind him. The Doctor put the devices on the ground and started back to the Jeep.

'Sir... sir...' Perkins was a little breathless.

'Yes?' said the Doctor.

'Sir, we have some men on stand by to unload for you, sir. If you'd like, sir.'

The Doctor looked at Perkins in surprise. 'That would be most kind.' He turned on his heel and walked back to where he had left the first two devices.

Perkins called to three men standing by another lorry, and before long they had another ten of the devices positioned around the entrance to the hangars. The wires all snaked away to a portable generator on the back of a jeep, where the Doctor connected them together in a manner that seemed far more random than it probably was.

Eventually the Doctor strode over to where the Brigadier was waiting patiently. 'All finished, Doctor?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Now we wait.'

The Brigadier looked up as a small commotion started over towards the hangars. 'Looks like we won't have to wait long.' He started towards his control point. 'Places, men!' he bellowed, and the Doctor winced. Why was army life so geared around shouting? Why couldn't people just ask nicely for a change?

He looked over to the hangars and saw that a figure had appeared in the doorway. It was Sue. She started to make her way around the crater, towards the waiting UNIT men.

The Doctor hurried over to the Brigadier. 'Careful, Brigadier. Things may not seem as they really are.'

'That's Miss Mackenzie, isn't it? What the devil's she doing there?'

The Brigadier watched as Sue came closer, and noticed with a start that she was wearing a pair of sunglasses.

She stopped and reached up to remove the glasses. Her eyelids were closed, but suddenly flicked open to reveal jet-black orbs beneath. Behind her, other figures emerged from the huts, and started making their way towards the Brigadier's men.

The UNIT troops were starting to get jumpy, and they hunkered down, eyes seeking targets down the barrels of their guns.

A low throbbing sound started humming around the area, and suddenly, one of the UNIT men closest to where Sue was standing screamed and started firing at the ground. Another soldier tried to stop him, but abruptly pulled away, sheer horror showing on his face. He started gibbering, and curled into a ball.

'It's using the men's fear against them, Brigadier,' muttered the Doctor. 'Don't let them get too close.'

The Brigadier nodded, and shouted the order to open fire. His men

started firing at the approaching figures. Bullets hit and the people recoiled, only to continue their inexorable march towards the soldiers.

'Keep firing!' ordered the Brigadier, as he and the Doctor ducked for cover behind the Doctor's jeep. The air was full of the throbbing, pulsing sound, shooting and screaming as the troops succumbed to the visions being conjured in their minds. Those soldiers so far unaffected by the visions had found that aiming for anything but the head did not stop the advancing zombies, and so were now taking careful aim and shooting the people to the ground with precise shots between the eyes.

The Brigadier winced at the slaughter, but the Doctor touched his arm. 'They were already dead,' he reminded the Brigadier, before popping his head above the jeep to see how things were going.

The figure of Sue stood untouched towards the back of the advancing guard of controlled humans. Her body swung from side to side assessing the situation. The Doctor watched as she raised her hand and pointed at a lump of masonry sitting in a pile of weeds by the crater's edge. The rock shimmered with a further deep bass throbbing sound, and then, without warning, one of the soldiers in front of the Doctor, who had been manning one of the machine guns, screamed out in pain and surprise. As he fell to the ground, the Doctor saw that the lump of rock was now poking out from his chest, melded with the unfortunate soldier's body.

Sue pointed at a pile of bricks, and, one by one, they too shimmered and vanished, the deep throbbing sound accompanied by the screams of pain as, one by one, they reappeared within the bodies of the UNIT troops.

The Doctor ducked back down again. He knew that this was hopeless. He had tried to tell the Brigadier, but would he listen? He saw Perkins waiting by the generator, watching the Doctor and awaiting the instruction to switch on. The Doctor nodded at Perkins, and the soldier bent over the machine and threw the connection.

Immediately an electric hum filled the air and the Doctor's jerry-rigged coils started glowing and throbbing with their own power. Sue staggered back as the wall of energy hit her. Immediately, all the zombified humans fell to the ground as though they were puppets that

had just had their strings cut. Sue's face furrowed in concentration, and, one by one, the coils sparked and exploded, unable to contain the feedback that Sue was generating.

The Doctor breathed in deeply, and turned to the Brigadier. 'We've got to pull back. This is senseless.'

The Brigadier nodded and, standing up, shouted, 'Cease fire!'

Almost immediately the chattering guns fell silent, and smoke drifted across the airfield. Bodies littered the tarmac, and UNIT troops lay where they had fallen, some crying and sobbing, others wrestling with internal demons. Some of the bodies had been covered up by more fortunate colleagues, others showed the terrible effect of brick and masonry fused with human flesh.

The Doctor stood beside the Brigadier. 'I'm going to have to sort this out myself,' he said. 'Any ideas Brigadier?'

The Brigadier shrugged. 'Unless you want to invite her to tea. There's usually a thermos in the staff car...' he said with a note of suppressed despair in his voice.

The Doctor looked at the Brigadier. His eyes widening. 'Thermos! You're a genius Alistair. A genius.' The Doctor turned and, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, started walking towards the small figure of Sue, who still stood in the wreckage.

When the Doctor came close to Sue he stopped. 'It's alright,' he said quietly. 'You've won.'

Sue looked at him, the black planes of her eyes giving no hint as to what she/it was thinking. 'The war is not yet won,' she spat. 'I need energy. I need evil acts and thoughts to feed upon. It makes me strong.'

The Doctor nodded enthusiastically. 'Mmm, I quite agree. I quite agree. But why set your sights so low?'

Sue's eyes narrowed. 'Explain.'

'Well,' the Doctor gestured expansively about him, 'this is such a small place, really. Tiny, insignificant planet in the backwaters of the Milky Way. Why stop here?' He leaned in towards her. 'Why stop with this planet, when you could feed off the entirety of time and space? Just think of it, the wars, the destruction. The fear generated by the Daleks or the Cybermen. Entire planetary systems condemned to

aeons of misery and hate by races of ruthless killers. All this could be yours.'

'You will explain how this could be?'

The Doctor smiled to himself. The parasite was a simple creature, really, with simple needs. This was almost too easy. He sighed. 'I'm not from around here...'

'I knew it... an alien,' whispered Sue.

'An alien who has a ship...' tempted the Doctor. 'I could be persuaded to take you for a little trip if you behave yourself.'

Sue's body stepped forward. This was an opportunity that it had not foreseen. 'You will do it,' the creature ordered. 'Or I will kill more of your human friends.'

'I don't doubt it,' said the Doctor. 'Shall we go?'

He turned and led the way back towards the Brigadier.

'Brigadier. This lady and myself are taking a little trip. Can you ask all your men to allow us through, to make no attempts to stop us, and to allow us access to the TARDIS when we get back to HQ?'

The Brigadier nodded, and started relaying instructions into his walkie-talkie as well as to the men around him. The Doctor and Sue clambered into the staff car and with the Doctor at the wheel headed back to UNIT HQ and the TARDIS.

TEMPTATION WAITS

The doors to the TARDIS' central control room burst open, and the Doctor strode in, the ends of his long scarf flapping around his legs. 'Come in... come in... I know it doesn't look much, but it's home to me.'

Sue entered behind him, looking around in puzzlement. 'I know, it does seem bigger doesn't it...'

'No,' said Sue. 'That's obvious. But I sense intelligence. There is life here, but a life unafraid.'

The Doctor smiled. 'That's my TARDIS,' he murmured, brushing an imaginary speck of dust off the central hexagonal console, and using the end of his scarf to buff up the clear glass of the time rotor nestling at the console's heart.

Sue turned to the Doctor, 'So when do we leave?'

'Oh, soon,' said the Doctor vaguely. 'There's something I want to show you first, something to really get your juices flowing.'

He swept around the console and out through another door at the back of the room. Sue hurried after him, her black eyes gleaming at the thought of absolute power.

The Doctor eventually stopped at another set of doors and turned to Sue. 'You realise that if you enter here, I will be unable to protect you from the rush of emotions: love, hate, fear...'

Sue looked levelly at the Doctor for a moment, then pushed past him and through the doors into the room beyond. The Doctor smiled to himself and followed.

Inside the room, a pale pink glow suffused everything. It was quiet. Totally silent. Not even the normally ever-present background hum of the TARDIS could be heard. The room itself was empty. A pale pink-washed empty space of around ten metres square, with a high vaulted ceiling. The walls, as with all the walls in the TARDIS, were covered with large staggered roundels, but aside from this, there were no distinguishing features at all.

Sue stood in the middle of the room. She slowly span in place, taking in the nothingness that there was to see. 'What is this?' she hissed. 'There's nothing here.'

'Precisely,' said the Doctor. 'Nothing. No emotions. No stimuli. Absolutely nothing. That's why it's called a zero room. It's lovely isn't it? So calm and peaceful.' He looked at Sue. 'How are you feeling now?'

There was a muted throb of power but this faltered and tailed away to nothing. Sue's eyelids were fluttering closed. 'No input...' she slurred.

The Doctor backed away to the door. 'I'll come back and check up on you soon,' he said before gently leaving and closing the door, leaving the parasite to its own form of introspection in the zero room. The Brigadier had been spot on, he mused. A vacuum flask. A little piece of space totally isolated from everything around it. Whatever is placed in it simply remains as it was – if it was hot, it stays hot. If it was cold, it stays cold. No outside influences. Just the sort of environment to keep a mind parasite docile.

Much later, the Doctor returned to the zero room to find Sue's body collapsed on the floor. Her body had no pulse, and there were no

detectable signs of life. When the Doctor lifted one eyelid, the blackness beyond rippled slowly. The Doctor sadly located a trolley and a large sheet of plastic from one of the TARDIS' storerooms and, wrapping Sue's body in it, wheeled it through the corridors to the control room.

The TARDIS had materialised on a barren planet, somewhere in the distant past. The instruments showed that no life would develop on this rock for a millennium, more than enough time for the parasite to slowly starve to death, deprived of any stimuli or input. Using a small shovel, the Doctor dug a shallow grave for the body, and, when he had carefully placed his plastic-wrapped package in the depression, he filled in the hole.

As the world's sun slowly sank over the horizon, the Doctor stood in thought by the mound of dusty earth for a moment. He pondered, hat in hands, on the waste of life, on the hopelessness of ambition, and on the fates that always seemed to place him as the saviour of the moment.

He lifted his hat to his head and jammed it on. Then he turned and walked through the gathering gloom back to the TARDIS.

In The Days of 'The Days of "The Days of Our Lives"'

Simon Bucher-Jones

The throne was huge. The tips of his toes barely reached the floor, and the leather strapped sandals were cutting into his feet; but he knew he must not let his mother down by squirming. This was an important moment; the climax of the battle of wills that was being played out before his young eyes. He could no more look away than he could remove the heavy two-tiered crown that signified — so his mother had told him — the kingship of the upper and lower Niles. It would be over soon now he hoped; the heat of the brilliant lights that flooded the throne room was burning him.

The bearded Prophet was shouting his demands for the slaves, again and again. He was a giant of a man. Idly, the boy under the Pharaoh's crown wondered if he would grow so straight and so strong. Maybe if he ate all his greens as his mother insisted. He kept his eyes on the Prophet as he cast his staff upon the floor. There was a flash of powdery smoke, and a snake writhed on the ground. The boy stifled a smile; he had seen this trick down before. It was time for the next trick. He knew he should not look up, it was not right that he should take his eyes off the Prophet; but even so he could not resist a glance towards the roof. It was a glance of admiration. There, crawling along a ledge seeming faced with stone slabs, was the ancient Sorcerer Ammon-Ra. His long bones cast a gruesome shadow. In his hand he carried an iron staff. It was shiversome to watch him; he had the moves so well, so spiderlike, so evil. He would bang his staff on the stones and send them crashing down on the Prophet. His intent was clear from his very stance.

It was, Alfie thought, the best acting he had ever seen. He hoped he could do as well when he grew up. Until then the part of the boy King Tutmoses was the best role his mother had ever got him. It was the

sensational children's character role of 1939. His name was going to be in lights; well his stage name anyway, his mother said Trousdale wasn't a good name for an actor. He let his bored King's gaze drop to the Prophet, and so he did not see the man crawling just behind the Sorcerer reach out to him. He did however see the flash of light, and he heard the make-up girl scream from behind the cameras, and he saw the body of Ammon-Ra fall to the floor of the set, burning as it fell.

Inside the Ship: Act 1 Scene 1

Polly and Ben were arguing. Good naturedly enough and with only a modicum of teasing banter, but there was no denying it was getting on the Doctor's nerves. Since his change, when his body had renewed itself with the help of the TARDIS he had been nervous around Ben. The young able seaman had doubted the Doctor's identity to begin with. And in a sense maybe he had doubted it himself: no amount of theoretical knowledge could prepare the psyche for the shock of renewal. Polly had been kinder but even she could have no real conception of what had happened to him; neither of them could.

'Hey Doc,' Ben sinned, 'settle an argument?'

'Oh,' the Doctor fidgeted as if he'd been asked to shoe a mettlesome horse, 'I don't know if I could do that. I mean I'm no authority.' A quirk of his lips suggested he didn't believe himself for a moment.

Polly beamed sweetly, 'But you must have an opinion?'

He beamed back, 'Must I? I try not to get involved in local disputes, you know that!'

'No, but really,' Ben said, 'Cliff Archer right? Was he better as Hornblower or Hamlet, 'cause I say Horatio but Miss High Culture here holds out for the Prince of Denmark.'

'Well,' the Doctor paused, 'I think we've established Ben that you prefer his middle period; *Devil Dogs Of The Marines, Bedtime For Bingo*, and that film you can't remember the name of where he plays a man who loses both legs in an accident.' Ben looked surprised as he hadn't thought the Doctor had been listening, and Polly winced at the return to a painful subject, but the Doctor didn't seem to notice. 'But

most serious film buffs consider that his finest performance was as a child as Prince Tutmoses in Cecil B De Mille's epic sampler of history *The Days Of Our Lives*.'

'That black and white effort where he plays an Egyptian?' Ben snorted, 'It's so slow.'

Polly looked serious, 'You know it's only just occurred to me that the Doctor's probably seen films that haven't even been made yet, made in our time I mean.'

Ben perked up, 'Yeah that'd be interesting, come on Doc, so what does Cliff get remembered for?'

The Doctor muttered something under his breath.

'Come again?' Ben asked, but the Doctor was already busying himself setting co-ordinates. 'Did you catch that Duchess?'

'I'm not sure. What sort of film has a character in called something like O'Brian Ken O'Boyo?'

'Something Irish,' Ben guessed. 'Sort of leprechaun flick probably, you know pots of gold.'

1999: Act 4 Scene 3.

The editing suite was a mess of gutted 1960s and 1930s camera, the videocam technology that had been packed inside spilling out with the brutal insolence of a hernia. The Director put down his clipboard, and smirked at the Doctor. 'Nothing to say? I imagine the audacity of our masterpiece has struck you dumb! You might like to complement me before I have you thrown off the lot.' Polly entered 'And your make-up girl impostor too.'

The Doctor scowled, 'Audacity! Hardly – a simple bit of temporal trisection, like making a jug by origami it might look pretty but it won't hold water and you know it.'

'We have the three best performances of the most popular film actor of his day within a single film, and all without CGI.' The Director grinned his Hollywood Cheshire cat smile, teeth perfectly capped, in a surround of beard. 'And by filming in the past we saved so much on expenses. Our accounts make the Blair Witch Project look like Heaven's Gate. We own a lot to the late lamented Professor Whi....'

'I don't care whose research your flimflam is misusing,' the Doctor cried – interrupting him – 'By filming in the past you've interfered in your own past you orthodontic ninny.' The Doctor pulled a dog-eared copy of the *Radio Times; Films On DVD Guide 2003* out of his fur coat, and started to read.

2003: Inside the Ship: Act 3 Scene 1.

'Stay in the ship!' The Doctor's voice was terse. Ben tried to stand up to him, but there was something in the small man's eyes that admitted of no compromises. 'I'll just be a moment, but it could be very dangerous, if we saw or heard too much.' Polly ran over to the consol from the chair where she had been sobbing her mascara running onto her sleeve when she had rested her head on her arm on the little card table.

'What are you going to do?' she sniffed.

'I'm going to buy a film guide. I won't be long.' He paused and looked at Ben expectantly. 'Well have you got any money?'

Later he cradled the thick book on his knee, reading out loud. 'Archer, Clifford. Born Alfred Trousdale 1929. A somewhat undistinguished character actor whose childhood career floundered after the filming of Cecil B De Mille's *The Days Of Our Lives*, an unfinished epic trawl through history in which he played Prince Tutmoses the young ruler of Egypt. He would return to the film ironically in 1969 when a would-be remake cast him as Ishmael leader of the Egyptian slaves.' The Doom snorted, 'Ishmael! I suppose Pharaoh's army was swallowed by a white whale.'

Polly bit her lip. 'Does it say anything about the death.'

'No, Polly it does not. And that might mean we can prevent it.'

Ben glared at the Doctor. 'That's not the sort of thing you used to say. What about that slideshow affair you gave us after we started travelling with you, "Hello I'm Troy McClure you may remember me from such safety films as: *So You've Altered History*, and *Butterflies On My Blue Suede Shoes*."'

'That was quite different, Ben.'

'How different?'

'Ben,' the Doctor said slowly and patiently, 'a man is dead.'

Polly sniffed, 'And we killed him.'

The Doctor held his finger to his lips and gave a meaningful tilt of his head at Ben, to which Ben remained luckily oblivious. Polly subsided. 'Now Polly we don't know that, for certain, and besides if I'm right, there's a sense in which the death hasn't happened yet. And anything that hasn't happened yet can be prevented. Besides goodness knows who'd fill the film vacuum left by Alfred's unavailability,' the Doctor continued, 'suppose someone else starred in all his films. They might do anything with their popularity, even run for President. The whole political spectrum of 20th century Earth could be very different!'

'Oh sure,' Ben scoffed, 'an actor as President. Still if it matters so much to you Duchess, maybe we should try something.'

The Doctor set the controls for 1999, and noticeably, crossed his fingers.

1999: Act 3 Scene 2.

The aging, the reclusive, the down-at-heel Clifford Archer was already rehearsing his self-mockery as he opened the door of the squalid digs he shared with half the students in London expecting to blink in the lens of a videocam. Instead he found himself staring down into two quizzical brown eyes under a ridiculously out of date and over-tall hat. The hat immediately struck a chord; thirty odd years ago he knew someone who wore a hat that. Odd, the tricks memory played; things from his childhood were coming into sharp focus these days, his middle years were a blur with the occasional close-up, and where he'd put the cat food last night he certainly didn't know. The bane of being seventy.

The man took off his hat revealing a mop of hair that to Clifford's practised eyes looked very like a wig. The thought made Cliff wonder if his own was straight.

'The washing machine,' the man said, 'can I come in?'

'Did the landlord send for you?' Clifford asked, he hadn't noticed that the shared communal washing machine that was serving his, and the student's one room "flats" was broken, 'Only it's not very convenient, I've got some people coming.' He found himself embarrassed enough

to try to explain even though it was none of the man's business. It was the hat mainly. He couldn't for the life of him remember where he'd seen it before, but he was sure he had. 'A film crew, actually, they're doing a documentary with reconstructions. On the Curse of the *The Days Of Our Lives* – the film you know.'

The man looked at him as if he was mad. 'Ah no I'm afraid you misunderstand me, I don't know your landlord, but the cat food is in the washing machine, and you really must not make that documentary.'

As it turned out, the cat food was in the washing machine. Clifford shrugged, that explained the socks in the larder then, he was getting vaguer. His doctors hadn't given him long: all the more reason to keep working, screw one last tenner out of this unforgiving wretched business, leave enough to get his daughter out of debt and cover the funeral expenses.

'How did you know?' he asked the stranger.

'Obvious place,' the man remarked giving the household tabby a tentative pat. It hissed at him.

'I can't take your advice, you know.'

'I thought not. If you did it would have complicated things, but Polly wanted me to try.'

'Hang on!' Polly. There was a make-up girl called that on the remake, back in 1969 when he'd been playing the Hebrew rebel, thingummy-bob, the one based on Moses that they couldn't call Moses for some legal reason. A make-up girl called Polly, and a man with a great big hat. The same man? Impossible the chap didn't look a day over.... actually Clifford couldn't get to within a decade of the man's age. He had one of those born old faces that worked you over for leading parts but gave you the pick of character roles. 'Surely we've met?' – Clifford found himself saying – oh well he could only look stupid, as well as old, poor, and undervalued. 'Weren't you technical advisor on the remake?

The man looked startled. 'Oh now, not really possible is it. My father, yes, my father did some work in British films; old school technical work, painting backdrops on glass, all very specialised, always known as the, er, Doctor.'

Clifford's memory clicked into place. 'Yes that was what he liked to be called. Bit of a poser really if you don't mind me saying so.' He gave the man an appraising look. 'He really stamped on your face didn't he. You could be his double.' He set his face into his best scowl. 'It must really have been a family thing. Wasn't his father in on the 1939 shoot?' A look of panic passed over the stranger's face. Clifford felt a pang of compassion.

'Listen if their reputation is on the line, I can't help that. Everyone on the set was absolved of blame at the time by the police. I'm not about to point any fingers. This is an artistic recreation for The South Bank Show, not bloody Watchdog.'

'A precise recreation?'

Clifford sniffed. 'Well look at me, I'm hardly set up to play the romantic lead am I. I'll be taking the role of the elderly magician Ammon-Ra; the sorcerer that Moses, well whatshisname, defeats in the turning staffs to snakes contest. So it'll be my second role.'

'Your third surely.'

'If you're referring to my performance as Prince Tutmoses in the 1939 original, I regard that as a mere cameo.'

'It doesn't worry you then?'

'I'm not superstitious. Not every actor wets himself when someone says *Macbeth* you know.'

'Even so, wouldn't you call it odd? Two deaths in two attempts to film the same story, both of the same character, the one you're due to play tomorrow?'

'In a re-enactment of a scene, not the whole film.'

'Ah forgive me, but how many scenes exactly was Ammon-Ra in?'

Clifford, bit his lip. 'Get out.'

He slammed the door behind the man his heart pounding.

They both knew which scene he was being paid to re-enact.

Ammon-Ra's one and only scene. The biggy, the death scene.

Scene 13.

1939: Act 1 Scene 2.

'You reckon we can just walk up and have a butchers, then?' Ben

asked, as the Doctor locked the TARDIS in the backlot.

Polly looked puzzled, and taking pity on her, Ben added, 'Butcher's hook, look, Duchess.'

'Yes, I don't see why not,' the Doctor answered. 'We only want an autograph, if anyone asks. You can be an extra, Polly can be from make-up.'

Polly executed a half ironic bow; and seemed to be considering demanding a starring role instead, but let it pass.

'And you?' Ben asked, he'd started to feel the same respect for "this" Doctor as he had for the old man he'd met the Day Wotan Went Mad, but it didn't feel right calling him sir, like he would have the old geezer.

'I shall say I am on the, er, technical side.'

1969: Act 2 Scene 1

'…wouldn't listen, the thick-pated nincompoop,' the Doctor grumbled as the TARDIS materialised on the backlot, again, thirty years later than its previous visit.

Ben looked puzzled. 'But you already said he wouldn't listen, that's why you didn't want to ask him.'

'Well of course I knew he wouldn't listen,' the Doctor spluttered, 'if he'd listened we wouldn't have been in this hodgepodge of a dog's breakfast in the first place would we.'

'I don't think we ought to go out there,' Ben said setting himself up to block the Doctor's passage to the doors.

Polly put her hand on the able-seaman's arm knowing he couldn't deny his 'duchess' anything. 'Please, Ben.'

Ben shook his head, angrily, stubbornly, the same stubbornness that had made him deny his own eyes when they had seen the Doctor change so recently from a white haired patrician of around 800 years of age into this dark haired scamp. 'What if we make it worse?'

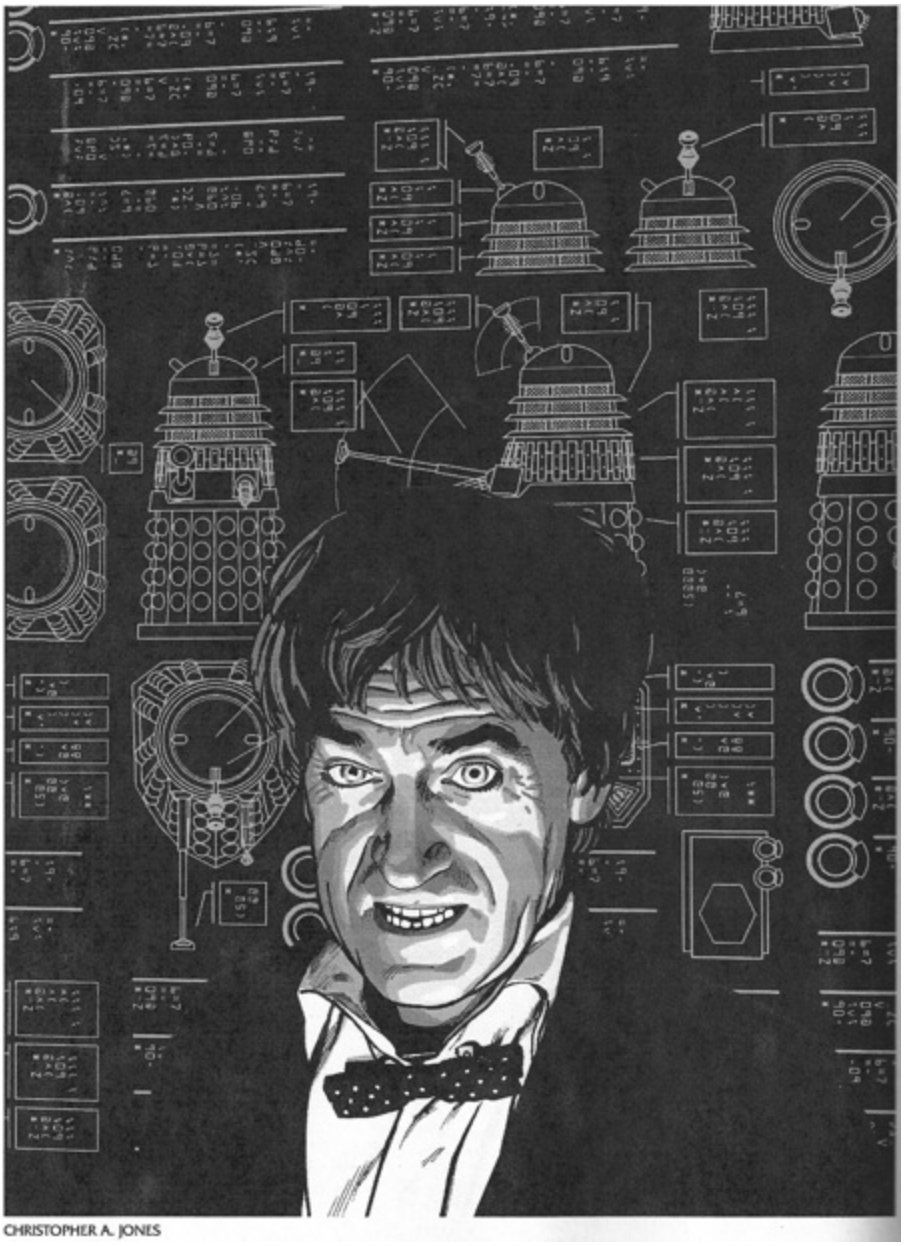
The Doctor looked him in the face, 'for once I don't think that's possible, do you? Pass me my hat there's a good fellow.'

Cliff Archer strode out of make-up with, he was aware, a cheesy grin on his face, the image of the beautiful girl who'd put the finishings on

lingering in his mind. Nice girl, gorgeous blonde hair. Posh woman to be doing such a menial job, might be worth asking out once the picture was in the can.

A man in a tall hat, a tatty jacket and frankly Chaplinesque trousers bounded onto the set, framing the empty air at the back between his hands. 'Ah Cliff Archer,' he cried, 'I'm so pleased to meet you.'

'You are?' Cliff hedged hoping he could get away with a simple autograph.



CHRISTOPHER A. JONES

'You again, Doctor!' An older voice cut through the question as a figure robed in green, his face hidden within a carved Mummy mask, stepped onto the dais that formed the central feature of the set. Cliff recognised the costume from the 1939 production. It was a classy replica — the film's designers had opted to pick up on the original designs. Cliff suspected it was intended to let them to drop in background scenes from the original, painted out of black and white with a single tone for mood. Art they called it; he called it cheapness. The mask was an Art Nouveau horror, the faked wrinkles of the plastic bandages stretching the face into a distorted scream. He wondered for a moment what idiot would wear it, replica or not, knowing the gruesome fate of the actor in the previous production. The mask had been burned right onto his face. As if by lightning.

He felt a momentary pang of guilt to realise that he'd never bothered to learn the name of the actor who was electrocuted in 1939, still he could rectify that now, by learning the name of this chap; by giving him some encouragement. 'So, you are?' he asked, getting as much heartiness into his tone as he could faced with that evil, near reptile face.

'Bloody Ammon-Ra who do you bloody think I am, the jolly green giant,' — the voice was old, cultured even, but bitter and Cliff felt himself blushing at the foul language. Well damn the man, if that was his attitude he could just stay a nameless figure in a mask for all he cared.

The man in the hat rested a hand on his arm, 'Do try to forgive him, it must be very hot in there, and I'm not sure he can see out very well.' He tapped a finger on the mask's glassy eyes.

'Do you mind!' The Mask jerked away on Ammon-Ra's scrawny neck and his voice came out again angry as a hornet. 'I'm only in this iron-maiden of a thing for one scene, I don't need the sons of has-been technical advisors getting me trapped in it.'

Cliff turned to the man in the hat. 'Your father worked on the last film? I don't remember...'

'Oh, no reason why you should,' the man said quickly. 'Very unassuming, spent his whole time getting painted into a corner, I mean painting the corners.'

The masked mummy, groaned, and Cliff realised the bitter old fool was laughing. 'Vain old git, more like. Going on about how the film would end in tragedy, I wouldn't have been surprised if it hadn't been his electrical work that fried my predecessor. Still he was proved right I suppose which was a bloody strange co-incidence what with it happening just like...'

'He predicted,' the man in the hat finished, capping Ammon-Ra's sentence. The Mummy seemed to take that as a last straw. 'Listen, I told you, I have to do this — don't think you can get me off the set by hanging about with poor quality look-alikes either. I'm going through with it.' And he stalked off.

Cliff whistled. 'Bit of a chip on his shoulder. Did your father really work on the 1939 film? I played Prince Tutmoses you know, something of a big break for me, not a normal child star role you see, had some meat to it. When the magician got struck by lightning, and the film went unfinished I have to admit I went to the dogs somewhat.' He looked sheepish. 'Alcohol I'm afraid. Mother's ruin.'

'Listen,' the technical fellow said suddenly, 'you could do so much better than this film, you know. You're a genius. Why don't you get yourself a role over at MGM.'

Cliff choked back a laugh. 'A genius? Hmm, you know what MGM offered me: a role with Bingo their best selling chimp. I almost took it too, and then this came along. My chance to put things right, make up for lost opportunities.'

'It's very important not to live in the past, Mr Archer, humans aren't designed for it.'

Cliff looked at the little technical advisor, and snorted with laughter. 'I'm sorry', he said, 'no offence man, but look at us, this whole set looks like something out of the 1930s, and you look like the 1890s and you're telling me not to live in the past?'

'Well, appearances aren't everything.' The Doctor frowned, wrinkles pushing up his brows and mussing his Beatle-cut hair. He coughed as if clearing his throat before delivering a scripted line. 'I must warn you. This filming will end in tragedy.'

Cliff chortled, 'You are a card, Doctor.'

'You just remember I said it.' The man got up, 'Can you direct me to

your Director?'

1939: Act 1 Scene 3.

Polly came out of the make-up tent at a full run straight into Ben's arms. She was almost hysterical.

'I've just done Cliff's make-up,' she shouted, as if it was a crime.

'Calm down, calm, down,' Ben said, feeling her sobs heave against his body. 'That was the idea wasn't it; see what the boy looked like, get a better idea of his Greatest Film?'

'No, no, you don't understand. It wasn't Prince Tutmoses.'

'But that's his part isn't? The Royal?'

'This was Ishmael, the rebel, and he was thirty years too old. It wasn't a different actor it was him, again. Him as he will be. I've just put make-up on someone from thirty years in the future!'

Ben couldn't doubt her word, 'Come on let's find the Doctor. He'll know what's going on.'

1999: Act 3 Scene 4.

'I'm ruined.' The Director was slumped in his canvas-backed chair, his bearded face in his hands.

'Possibly,' the Doctor conceded. 'Ruining your own star's career isn't the brightest publicity move. He had the box office appeal of a brick after drinking himself stupid between your thirty year separated takes. The only films he ever made were Italian wrestling movies.' He paused. 'And your magnum opus of course.'

The Director looked at the little man. There was something like kindness in his tone. A ruthful acceptance of human folly maybe. 'You think there might be some way out?'

The girl from make-up nodded, picking up her lines from the Doctor, the Director noted, she might have been a good actress herself.

'Couldn't you call off the shoot?' she said, 'say your backers have pulled out? You don't want to kill a man, do you?'

'No... no... I don't, but how do I know that will happen, it hasn't yet.' He wavered. People died all the time shooting films. There had been *The Crow* after all. And if he just thought of Cliff as a stunt man, well

they were two a penny.

The Doctor waved his film guide, 'and this though written, has not yet been written. I got it from a bit of time caught up in the cat's cradle your lashup has created in the continuum. Walk away. Let it unravel. There's been too much harm. If you end it now, the filming in 1939 will peter out. Cliff's career will falter but by 1969 he'll have a...' He glanced at a dog-eared page its edge turned down to mark the reference... '"a pleasingly inoffensive minor farce with a chimp" awaiting him.' He smiled at the girl, 'Maybe not Hamlet, Polly, not yet, but a step away from immolation.'

The Director rubbed at his beard nervously. 'If only I had something else to offer the studio.'

The Doctor put his arm around hit shoulder, 'Tell me, have you ever considered making a film about the Titanic.'

1999: Act 3 Scene 5.

'Cut.'

'That's it, show's over, get down from the gantry. We won't be needing you after all Ammon.'

Clifford tensed in the Mask. Not need him, after all these years? Not bloody need him! His old muscles ached but he was buzzing with adrenaline. He'd show them a performance. He edged forward casting his shadow over the scene below. The bloody look-alike playing Ishmael, his fatuous young face a parody of Clifford's own at that age looked up at him. The man was shouting something, couldn't he stick to his bloody lines? Clifford's hand shook as he raised the iron staff. He just had to strike it on the fake stones supported by the gantry; the FX boys would handle the flash as the accident was recreated.

Then he saw the other face looking up at him. The boy: Pharaoh Tutmoses. It was like looking into a mirror at the far end of a dusty hallway. The admiration in those eyes. His brighter memories of childhood froze him, and Ben inching alone the gantry behind tackled him before he was within a yard of the exposed cable.

1939: Act 1 Scene 4.

The boy perched on the throne was tiny, holding his legs stiff as a board so as not to swing them. Naked enthusiasm in his darting eyes. The tyke, Cliff wished he'd had time to talk to him, swap memories, offer him some savlon or zambuc for his feet if those sandals hurt as much as his had thirty years before. But everything was rush on this shoot; no rehearsals, just single run-throughs with multiple cameras. 'Editing, my boy,' the Director had said, 'it's all in the editing. All in how you put the pieces together.'

He banged his staff on the floor.

'Let my people go!'

Up above, Mr-bloody-Ammon-bloody-Ra would be getting into position.

Just a little bit longer and the past wouldn't be closing in so much.

He cast his staff down watching the flash powder hide the substitution of the fake snake.

'Behold the power of the One True God!' His voice was still steady. Surely the cue had to come anytime now.

And then there was a clap like thunder.

And then there was a familiar lightning.

And he heard the make-up girl scream from behind the cameras, and he saw the body of Ammon-Ra fall to the floor of the set, burning as it fell.

'Did you see?' Polly shouted as the Doctor dragged her away. 'Behind him, on the gantry? It was Ben, he pushed him.' The sizzling sound had barely stopped.

The Doctor let go of her suddenly. 'It can't have been. I sent Ben back to the TARDIS to get some of my equipment. It's too late for that now. We have to get away from here, and quickly, before we get caught up in events.'

'But he's dead,' Polly said as if it was all that mattered.

'Dead and he should never have been here.' The Doctor whispered. 'You couldn't have known Polly, but I've seen the man who died before in the future, those long limbs, that habit of moving at a half hunch, that trick with the shadow. A dozen films carry that signature pose.' He mopped his brow with a handkerchief. 'We've just seen Clifford Archer

die at least sixty years too soon.'

Epilogue:

'And this is the last one I intend to buy for some time.'

'Only one's he's paid for,' Ben muttered, attracting a dig in the ribs from Polly.

The Doctor settled down to read. 'Hmm. Not too bad; missed some of the highs but got others. Oh no!'

Polly and Ben jumped, 'What is it Doctor?'

'Poor Alec Guinness, not his cup of tea at all. He must have hated it.'

And try as they might they never did get the Doctor to explain that remark, and although Ben looked for the new film guide the next day he never found it again, or any of its previous versions.

For Queen and Country

Dylan Crawfoot & Peter Petroff

'You want me to *what*?'

Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart - veteran, loyal officer of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, leader of the United Kingdom's division of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce - shook his head to clear away the sudden confusion; the kind that was so typical of these conversations.

Elegant as always, the Doctor leaned forward with his best persuasive manner and smile. 'Oh come now, dear chap. You could do with a day away from all this paperwork.' The Doctor's hand waved across the desk, dismissively indicating the reams of forms ranked and stacked with military precision on the meticulously polished oak surface.

'Let me see if I understand this correctly, Doctor - after driving all the way back from Wales, now you want to get away on another one of your "holidays", you want *me* to come with you - in that ludicrous machine of yours?'

The Doctor reached into his pocket and withdrew the oddly shaped piece of silvery metal. His fingers stretched out and the key dropped from his hand, stopped in its fall by the chain still looped around his hand. It swung to and fro, catching the light streaming from the window behind the Brigadier.

Lethbridge-Stewart looked around the room, considering. He quite clearly remembered the rolling, featureless grey dunes the last time he set foot in that blue box of lunacy. How long had it taken him to finally accept that the Doctor really travelled through the whole of space and time in that thing?

On Friday afternoons he occasionally liked to have a pint with Yates and some of the regulars at the local. UNIT had only recently moved into the new building with the new offices, barracks and the Doctor's new lab. Various volumes of British military history remained stacked in

boxes in the corner. The Brigadier had brought in a dull, rust-spotted British Army sword his uncle had handed down to him; he'd only just found the time to mount it on the wall opposite the desk and window. Because of the last week, he had to write reports to the MoD, Geneva and the Regular Army Liaison. Event reports, evaluation reports, disposition reports, Jo Grant's staff transfer forms -

Oh. Of course. No wonder the Doctor wanted to get away.

The Brigadier's hand reached out.

The Doctor beamed and gave Lethbridge-Stewart a congratulatory pat on the back. He switched down the auxiliary buffers and pulled the lever to open the door. 'My dear Brigadier,' the Doctor ushered him out the door with, 'welcome to your history - India; jewel of the British Empire.'

The Brigadier stepped out of the door, shading his eyes from the expected sun.

As he slipped and fell, he wondered why India was full of a thick mist, freezing and covered in churned mud.

Possibly he'd limited the engine power just a little too much. The TARDIS's absolute co-ordinate tracker hadn't been reliable for over three hundred years; since the last time he'd had white hair. The relative inertial tracker gave some response, but still needed to be broken in. The Doctor had been so eager to finally explore his freedom; he hadn't even properly retuned the console systems. And the Gallifreyan equivalent of the Auto Club was disbanded considerably more than three hundred years ago.

According to the inertial tracker, the time was about right - local time late 1854. The place was a touch out - instead of India, near the equator and a quarter circumference away, the TARDIS had landed short - somewhere too far north of the equator, less than an eighth circumference away. Considerably more accurate than she'd been in the last couple of centuries... but certainly not where intended.

The Doctor briefly wondered if he could blame it on the Earth's axial tilt.

He disappeared into the corridors of the TARDIS and reappeared a few minutes later, wearing his cloak and carrying a grey overcoat for

the Brigadier. Lethbridge-Stewart had cleaned himself up as best he could, then gratefully accepted the coat. Behind the TARDIS was, of all things, a windmill. Beyond that was a road leading off up a hill - a strip that would've been nothing more than a dirt track in drier days.

They set off up the hill. It was a very short time before they heard the first sounds of gunfire. In the thick fog it was hard to ascertain what direction it was coming from, but it was some distance away. The Brigadier drew his service revolver.

'There'll be no need for that, Lethbridge-Stewart,' the Doctor cautioned. 'We're not here to get involved with the arguments of the locals.'

'I thought that was your favourite pastime, Doctor.' The Brigadier gave a wry smile as he returned the revolver to its holster.

As they progressed further up the hill, the gunfire bled into other sounds. Voices, galloping horses, shells. The whistle and thud of artillery sounded some distance down the hill and began to creep ever closer.

'Down!' cried the Brigadier, throwing his Time Lord companion to the ground as the mud erupted in a line of explosions crossing their path. For a while their sense of hearing was useless, effective only for conveying the pain of the piercing noise to their brains. They lay face down for a while longer, waiting to be sure the danger had passed. The white noise in their ears gave way to the sounds of battle around them. Every now and again the mists would give way for a moment and give them a clearer view into the distance. To their left, the ground gave way to a ravine that stretched down into the distance. The side of the hill was dotted with trees; for the most part the ground was grass, shrubs and rocks. Ahead of them, they could see the white canvas of a camp toward the top of the hill. They'd almost made it to the camp when the gruesome discovery gave them pause - a corpse, lying by the road, its chest shredded by metal shrapnel. The shelling had already claimed too many victims.

'British army, mid nineteenth century. Poor fellow.' The Brigadier's analytical manner, borne of years of combat experience, belied his genuine sadness at the loss of life. 'I'd say it seems we're in the wrong place, Doctor.' He looked at the desolation around him. 'In more ways

than one.'

The Doctor agreed silently. 'I think we'll get a better idea of what's going on at the top of this hill,' said the Doctor.

As they approached, the nature of the encampment became more apparent - it was definitely military in nature. Amidst the swirling fog soldiers ran back and forth, some riding on horseback. The battle was obviously giving those in the camp an urgency; a chaos, even.

'Well, this clearly isn't India,' pondered the Doctor. 'I'm sure I've been around here before. In fact, this place reminds me somewhat of Crimea.'

The Brigadier's head turned, his expression becoming grim. 'And exactly how much does it remind you, Doctor?' he asked.

Before the Doctor could answer, their conversation was interrupted by a bellowing voice behind them.

'Why the hell aren't you at your post?' demanded the officer's stentorian roar. 'This damn campaign's enough of a shambles already.' He looked at the two travellers. One seemed to be a civilian, the other was probably a soldier, though it was hard to tell under all the mud. 'What unit are you with?'

The Brigadier responded. 'Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart,' he said, saluting. 'This is Doctor John Smith.'

'We've just arrived from London...' the Doctor began.

'Christ, more bloody observers!' The General turned away from them, his subsequent cursing drowned out by the sounds of gunfire.

'…observers for the Secretary of State, War and the Colonies,' the Doctor finished quietly.

The officer eventually returned the Brigadier's salute. 'Brigadier-General John Pennefather,' he said, his voice coloured by an Irish brogue. 'My apologies, but you've picked a fine time to arrive, Brigadier-General. Dannenberg took Shell Hill overnight and attacked at sunrise, we're badly outnumbered. You'd best accompany me. Lord Raglan's had about all he can take of you observers lately, you're the second lot to arrive in the last fortnight.' He turned and headed away.

'Dannenberg,' said the Brigadier as he set off to follow Pennefather. 'Shell Hill, Crimea. Russia. 1854, the Battle of Inkerman.'

'All the more reason to keep out of the way,' said the Doctor, 'A lot

of men will die here today, Allies and Russians both.'

The Brigadier stopped and stared at the Doctor. 'You've been here before?'

'Not here, not today. Balaklava.' The Brigadier saw the haunted look in the Time Lord's eyes as he gazed, unfocused, into the distance. 'So many deaths.'

The Doctor stood a moment longer watching as the fog swirled around them. The Brigadier looked at him, then turned and followed Pennefather into the tent.

The Doctor sat in the back of the tent, listening to the discussion. Lethbridge-Stewart stood almost shoulder-to-shoulder with Pennefather and Captain Everett as they clustered around the map on the table. On the tent pole behind them, an unsmiling portrait of Queen Victoria looked on. With every passing minute and every word of the damning report given by Everett, LethbridgeStewart's expression became even more grim.

'Tactically sirs, the supply lines are under threat. Here's our Home Ridge encampment; the main Russian encampment is here,' he pointed, 'on Shell Hill.'

'Which they took last night?' asked the Brigadier.

'And have already moved artillery onto, sir. Codrington's First Brigade are on Victoria Ridge with the Lancaster Battery to the west; Picquet's Guards are above Wellway to the southwest; our artillery is here,' he indicated, 'here and here. The Russian artillery is arrayed from east to west on Shell Hill, pointing at Home Ridge, Codrington and Kitspur. All up, we estimate their artillery outnumbers us two to one.'

The Brigadier tapped his finger on the map. 'What about their troop movements?' he asked.

Pennefather's voice rumbled, 'The riders estimate reserves coming behind Shell Hill,' he pointed, 'That bastard Soimonov is bringing his largest force from the northwest, possibly straight into our camp.'

The Brigadier blinked; without even thinking, he answered, 'He'll split his forces; some here to Home Ridge, but he'll send forces straight to Kitspur to come around behind the Eighteen Pounders.'

'Rubbish!' Pennefather growled. 'Sandbag Battery's in Kitspur and

we have the entire Second Division camp behind us! Soimonov and Dannenberg know that! They'll head straight for our forces here!'

The Brigadier turned to look at the Doctor; the Doctor had already fixed Lethbridge-Stewart with a dreadful, almost furious glare. Lethbridge-Stewart faltered for barely a moment, before turning back to the map. 'And our infantry?'

Everett frowned, looked to Pennefather, looked back to Lethbridge-Stewart. 'We...' Everett hesitated again.

'Spit it out, man!'

Everett cleared his throat and finally spoke up. 'They're positioned all along here at Home Ridge and Fore Ridge to the north as well, but... well sir, they'll be no good. The cartridges and caps have been dampened, sir. The rain and sleet got into the barrels with the rifles and muskets. The troops have maybe... one gun to each six or eight of the Russians.'

With a face cast in stone, Lethbridge-Stewart tried to take it in. Exercises like this had been offered in tactics classes. Knowing the history - history, indeed - just made this a miserable, slow torture. Lethbridge-Stewart was almost prepared to say that at least it couldn't get any worse.

Lethbridge-Stewart didn't expect the dishevelled figure that dashed into the tent. 'Sir!'

The officers turned to face the sweaty, ragged, panting soldier in the uniform, returning the salute he'd already thrown. 'Lieutenant Arthur Terrall, Forty-first Regiment, sir!'

Pennefather and Everett stepped forward. 'Lieutenant, at ease. Report!'

Terrall gasped for air, catching his breath as best he could. 'Russian reinforcements have come from the northeast sir, across the Chernaya River by the Inkerman Bridge. Come south along the Post Road and the Quarry Ravine. They're almost at Kitspur, sir.' 'Chyornaya Rika. Onyee pridut chyerez Inkyerman Mohst i togda v lyeva, okolo Volovia Ravina.'

Pennefather and Everett were still querying Terrall. The Brigadier turned to the Doctor, still in the corner of the tent.

'The Black River. They'll come across the Inkerman Bridge and then

left, following the Volovia Ravine.' The Doctor crossed his arms and sat back.

The Brigadier stared uncomprehending at the Doctor. The dull crump of shelling pounded faintly in the distance, picking up again. Coming closer to the camp...

'They're getting slaughtered down on Kitspur, Lethbridge-Stewart. We need every available man,' Pennefather declared, as he placed a sword on the table. 'You have to ride.'

The Brigadier looked at the sword on the table. He knew, even without turning around, that the Doctor was watching him. He knew how the Doctor would react to what he said next. Without even looking, he knew the Doctor wouldn't be able to stop himself; he'd leap out of the chair and start forward.

'Where am I needed?' he asked.

Pennefather moved out towards his horse. 'Everywhere,' said, not even breaking stride.

The Brigadier looked down at the sword again. He remembered the Doctor's caution; he knew what the Doctor had said; he was supposed to be here as an 'observer'...

But he was still a soldier. A soldier in the British Army.

And now his country needed him.

There was no choice, no alternative, no decision. No need. He reached forward, moved to take the sword, his fingers curled around the hilt - and the Doctor's hand slammed down on his.

From across the table the Doctor glared. Bad enough, he was stuck in the middle of another ridiculous human war. Even worse, it was the same stupid human war he'd been in a single mile and a mere fortnight away, two regenerations ago. Back then, Chaplet and Taylor were all for playing with human history.

And here he was again.

'What are you doing?' he demanded. The lines on the face had hardened; something like anger burned in his eyes.

The Brigadier, turned his head to face the Doctor; he faced the Doctor's fire and fought it with his own; he refused to flinch. His reply was simple, matter of fact. 'My duty, Doctor.'

'What do you mean, duty? This isn't your duty! This isn't your time! This has *nothing* to do with you!'

'Time? This is my country, Doctor. I've been called. I've been ordered. If I fail to answer the call, I betray my oath. I betray the Crown. I betray my officers, my men, my fellow soldiers. I betray my country! You cannot ask me to do that, Doctor. *You will not*!'

Four hundred years of the Doctor's history pushed at him - four hundred years of Gallifrey, the Time Lords, the Legacy and the Charge of Rassilon. The pressure of histories spanning galaxies and ages. Time his ground, Space his home. Once again he was the beloved of his homeworld, the Guardians of the Five Dimensions. His knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the hand clutching the hilt. His teeth clenched as he nearly hissed out the words.

'Listen to me. Your duty is to *UNIT*. Elizabeth the Second won't even be born for another seventy years.'

'It's my duty to the Crown. For Britain!'

'This is more than the Crown! If you die here and now at Inkerman, a hundred and twenty years and thousands of miles away, then you betray your own troops. Benton, Yates and Bell, leaderless and lost!'

'Officers and troops are dying here now!'

'They're not *your* troops! This is a chaotic, senseless, useless war! The British are fighting with the Turks and the French to keep the Russians out of the Ottoman Empire. In sixty years, World War One turns the British around to fight the Turks to *help* the Russians keep their supply lines open! Stay out of it! The British will barely hold their positions today when the French send reinforcements. It'll be another eighteen months before they finally capture Sebastopol.'

'I don't need a lecture on military history. There are men getting killed out there! It's my duty to save them!'

'*Thousands* of men are going to be killed out there. When you were born, they were already dead! If you go out there, the only difference you'll make will be to get yourself killed as well!'

Twenty years of military service. Five generations of army tradition. Hundreds of years of the British Empire. And one man burst into a fire that burned hotter than flame, deeper than Gallifrey's first nova.

The Doctor wasn't prepared; muscles forged when Gallifrey's Empire fell, when cold rocks now were once blazing stars, were thrown aside like leaves in the storm. Lethbridge-Stewart tore the sword clenched in his hand away from the table, leaving behind blood smeared from the torn skin, flinging the Time Lord away. The Doctor fell, stumbling against the chair. He staggered back, threw up his arm against the onslaught of the British juggernaut.

'***My duty!***'

And the British Soldier, loyal servant of the Crown, Brigadier-General Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart...

...was gone.

Perhaps it was the fighting.

Perhaps it was because he'd finally realised he was truly in a different century.

From the moment the Brigadier rode down the hill to Kitspur, he had no real sense of time passing. Events simply unfolded, making him hardly more than a witness. Pennefather riding along the slope, crying out to rally his troops with equal measures of inspiration and profanity as he fought alongside them. Soldiers of all ranks and regiments scattered in the fog, trying to keep control - of the battery, the rocky hillside territory, their own footing on the treacherous ground.

In the heavy fog, bayonets were the most reliable weapons; attackers remained hidden in the mist until right on top of their prey. Privates and corporals took charge of regiments; generals lay dead in the mud. The Brigadier found himself falling in charge of remnants of a leaderless regiment - a mere three soldiers, one of whom was badly wounded. The Brigadier fought valiantly, trying to help restore some sense of order to the chaotic British regiments. And yet, no time seemed to pass. Everything happened at once. Moments, seconds and minutes held no more meaning.

If there was no beginning or middle, there was most surely an end. Slowly, and for all the Brigadier's fighting, the men under his command succumbed to the bullets and bayonets, until the last of his charges fell to the ground. He finally found himself isolated on the field, his sense of time returning, filling the gap left by the fading fire, the evaporating

purpose. As the quiet numbness came over him the sword slipped from his cold hand, landing forgotten in the churned mud at his feet.

The Russians could hardly claim victory - their soldiers had borne the brunt of the desperate British fighting. Only sheer weight of numbers left them with any survivors at all on Kitspur as they tried to drive back the few remaining British soldiers. Too late to save the lost lives, the dying sounds of battle were overwhelmed by the thundering rumble from the south; a division of French cavalry, riding from behind Home Ridge. The Russians, who'd fought the British to the brink of disaster, were driven relentlessly back to defeat.

The sound of the French horses faded down the hill. The exhausted soldier looked down the hill as the dregs of battle receded into the slowly lifting fog. The Brigadier became aware that despite this he could still hear the sound of galloping hooves getting closer, this time coming up behind him. He turned around. The cruel, painful defeat wasn't overwhelming enough; now the Doctor was riding in to further lecture him. The Time Lord's cape flowed behind him in a way that seemed only to embody the man's arrogance.

'What are you doing here?' asked the Brigadier. It was all he could think to say.

'Coming to see if you're still alive,' replied the Doctor. 'I knew the French army would arrive at the end of the battle to...'

'Drive back the last of the Russians and claim Sandbag Battery and Kitspur for the Allies,' finished the Brigadier. 'The battle of Inkerman will be finished sometime this afternoon. The allies will hold their positions but suffer heavy casualties. The siege of Sebastopol will go on. I'm sure you enjoyed lecturing Miss Grant, but I do actually know my history, Doctor.'

'Yes, well...' It was all the Doctor could think to say. The reverberations of the recent argument could still be felt between the two old friends.

'Where have you been?' asked the Brigadier.

'There was a lot of damage from the shelling up on Home Ridge,' replied the Doctor. 'A lot of fellows were in a bad way.'

'So you've been helping then?' asked the Brigadier. The Doctor

could see what he was getting at. He didn't know what to say.

'That's what you were saying though, wasn't it,' said the Brigadier, 'The Kitspur, the French guard, Inkerman and the whole damn war. It's history. Only I'd watched it play out before my eyes as if I'd read it in a book. And it's like a book, it's all written out and there's nothing I can do to change things. I can only read and see what happens.

The Brigadier stopped. He looked down at the mud, then back down the hill as the mist and rain lifted.

'Did I make a difference?'

The Doctor followed his gaze down the hill. 'I've seen people struggle using all their heart, mind and strength to change history for the better only to end up failing utterly. And I've seen the destiny of whole empires rent asunder with a single careless sentence. In the end you can only respond to what life puts before you.' He paused, unsure how to phrase what he wanted to say next. 'Is there anything else you need to do here today?' He looked at the Brigadier. The fire he'd seen in the soldier's eyes on Home Ridge seemed to have faded away. Even though the Brigadier paused before he answered, he had already made up his mind.

'No,' he said, 'There's nothing more I can do here. It's time to leave.'

The return trip in the TARDIS had been a quiet affair. No conversation seemed adequate after what had been said and done on the battlefield. Back at UNIT HQ, the Brigadier returned to his office with a simple, 'Thank you, Doctor.' Back in his office, he pulled a volume covering nineteenth century British military history from one of the cardboard boxes on the floor. He read about the events he had just witnessed. It was the same history he'd always read, but now he was able to crystallise the events in his mind. Yet paradoxically, this only seemed to further distance himself from the history, his inability to influence in the Crimea marking him out as an outsider.

Lethbridge-Stewart sat at his desk. He busied himself with familiarity, his attention turning to the reports that needed to be written. For a while, the room was quiet but for the sound of pen on paper. Yet in his mind he could still hear the sounds of fighting; the shouts, the gunfire, the shelling and the sound of the French guard as they rode

inevitably onwards to drive back the Russians. He looked at his report, the detail of UNIT's recent engagement in Wales. He stopped writing and stared at the page. Would others ultimately read this as history? Would they be able to travel back from their time and insert themselves into the events of which he wrote? Or would they find themselves as ineffectual as he did in the Crimea? And if so, just how much were the events in his report really under his control? He put his pen down, unable to continue. Throughout his career he had been driven by duty, yet this duty now seemed meaningless in a world where time moved on, with or without him. He was looking around his office for a reassurance of some kind, past the bookshelves, past the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, when something caught his eye.

As the late afternoon sun shone through the window, he sat back slightly in his chair, squinting at the sudden flash of reflected light coming from before him. He squinted and sat forward again, blinking to clear away the eye's memory of the glare. He looked - and stopped, forgetting the report. Something in his face changed, his frustration giving way to something almost like -

- like a smile.

He closed his notebook, placed it and the pen in the top drawer of his desk. Standing up, he straightened his jacket, picked up his cane and walked to the door. He paused before the door, looked across the office for the last time then turned and left, closing the door behind him. The sun shone into the now empty room, reflected by the gleaming, antique sword hanging on the wall. Beside it, the ticking of a clock was all that broke the silence of the office.

Tee Time

TRINA L. SHORT

Tobias Vaughn, chairman of International Electromatics, looked at the dossier in front of him. That Edwin Doublet was being a real pain in the arse. To think that this little twerp was standing between him and CompuCirc, his only competitor. He sighed.

'Packer, there must be some way we can exploit his weaknesses. He is considerably in debt?'

'Correct. But he's somehow keeping one step ahead of bankruptcy.'

'And he got in debt how?' He'd read the dossier already, but it never hurt to keep his employees on their toes.

'Gambling, sir.' Packer stood straight when he answered. 'If I may suggest?'

'Do, go on.'

'Perhaps you could interest him in a wager.'

Vaughn laughed. 'And what shall we wager? Our companies? And upon what? Whether Manchester United has a chance this season?' He paused before continuing his lambaste. Then he opened the dossier and smiled. 'You know, Packer, you may be onto something...'

Edwin Doublet was pacing in his office. He was a tall, blonde, athletic man. His clean-shaven face was wrinkled with worry. He was waiting on a rather important phone call from his accountant. There was a chance, however slim, that he might break back into solvency.

The phone rang and Edwin jumped. He rushed over to answer.

'Mr. Doublet, there's a Mr. Vaughn on the line.'

'Oh crap,' he said. 'Well, put him through. He's the last person in the world I want to irritate now.' And the last person in the world I want to sell my company to, he thought.

He sat back in his leather chair and listened to what Vaughn had to say this time. Another offer on his company? Well, not quite...

'I'm sorry, Tobias. I don't think I should join you on this matter. I'm about to get some good news from my accountant,' he said

unconvincingly.

'Well, if you change your mind, Edwin,' the voice at the other end replied.

Doublet hung up and was soon pacing his office floor again.

As he hung up the phone, Vaughn informed his employee, 'He seems to think he has a way out of this mess. You've checked?

'There's no way he can stay afloat without another loan.'

'Good. Then I'm sure he'll be calling back about my offer.'

They waited in silence for several minutes. When the phone rang, Vaughn smiled at Packer. 'Looks like I'll be getting so fresh air after all,' he said before answering. 'Oh, and have one of the R&D boys come and see me. I have something I'd like them to build for me.'

Edwin Doublet arrived at the Edgerow Manor Golf Course two hours before tee off. The first thing he did was request the most experienced caddy they had. 'I don't care what the cost is, this is crucial.'

'Of course, sir. He'll meet you on the driving range, position 10.'

Edwin nodded and hauled his golf bag to the range. If he was going to beat Tobias at golf, he was going to need every bit of help that he could find. And he needed to win in order to pay off debts. To lose the game was to lose CompuCirc, and he had no intention of doing that.

At the driving range, he tried to relax and think about his game. He was actually a respectable golfer, but the stakes in this game were as high as they come. He had never played Vaughn in a match, but he heard the old man was a bit out of practice. Where there's life...

'That's not a bad swing,' said a voice from behind. 'But it looks like you're itching to slice it. That could be ruinous.'

Edwin turned to see the person speaking. He was an older gentleman, probably in his fifties, and he was dressed as a stereotypical golfer. His eyes were dark under the peaked cap, but the laugh lines told Edwin that this was a kind man at heart. The businessman towered over the caddy, who was holding his hand out for shaking.

'Dominic. I'm your caddy today Mr. Doublet.'

Edwin took the man's hand and shook it. 'Please, Dominic, call me

Edwin. So you're the best?' He was trying to place the accent. The rolled r's indicted the origin was probably Scotland. Lower Scotland, maybe.

Dominic smiled, a bit of a twinkle in his eye, 'So they say. You might say I'm something of an old hand when it comes to the sport.'

'Good. That's what I need more than anything right now.'

While they waited on Vaughn to arrive, Dominic gave Edwin a few pointers and a description of the first hole. When his opponent showed up with his caddy, Edwin was feeling considerably more confident.

'Edwin, it's good to see you, again. You look well.'

'Indeed, Tobias. Looks like life has been treating you exceptionally well.' Edwin noted that, even in his casual attire, Vaughn looked like he was ready for business. His white hair was cut short in a very practical cut and his sweater and slacks were immaculate.

'It has.'

When Doublet introduced his caddy to Vaughn, he merely nodded and ignored his proffered hand.

'I'm of the opinion that the caddy is best left to carry and mind the clubs.' He looked at his own caddy, a young woman with a pretty smile. She waved to Dominic, who politely doffed his cap. 'I have already explained this to my own.'

The young caddy stuck out her tongue at his back.

'Well,' Edwin said hastily, 'I've always enjoyed the game more when I have a knowledgeable caddy.'

'And there we shall have to agree to differ.'

Their party was called to the first hole and the four of them walked quietly to the green.

'As I said earlier, this is a par four,' Dominic said, as he handed Edwin his club.

'Right... Aim toward the left hill?'

Dominic nodded.

Edwin's first shot was a good one. And then Tobias Vaughn took his club from his silent caddy. Unfortunately, his shot was even closer to the hole. But by the end of the hole, both of the players were par. Edwin was pleased with his performance.

'You did quite well,' Vaughn admitted. 'I think you're doing remarkably well under the stress.'

Edwin grimaced.

Dominic looked concerned. 'I've always felt that golf was the best way to relieve stress. The open fields. The pleasant walks. The,' he paused slightly, 'stimulating conversation. All of it makes for a very relaxing day. And then there's the challenge of the game. It's a very personal game, wouldn't you say?'

Vaughn shook his head. 'It's only personal if you aren't really playing to win.'

'Well, what do you get if you win? I mean, the only person you're really competing against is yourself. "Can I do better on this hole than I did the last time?"'

Vaughn laughed. 'Sometimes you can win a considerable sum.'

Dominic frowned.

'A wager,' Edwin admitted.

'I see.'

They arrived at the second hole.

'I take it you don't approve of betting on a golf game?' Tobias asked the caddy.

'I think it removes much from the sport.'

'Ah Edwin, we have a purist!' He laughed as he picked out his driver for his shot.

Dominic, meanwhile, explained the lay of the land to Edwin and suggested the best way to avoid the trees. Once again, he performed better than he thought he would, only Vaughn had managed do one better.

'Very curious,' Dominic muttered.

'What?' Edwin asked.

'Oh, just that shot. Had an odd curve, didn't you think?'

Edwin shrugged. He'd seen a few odd curves in his time. They moved on to the next hole.

There was a water trap on the tenth hole. Other than that, it was rather straightforward. Vaughn strode up to the tee with his mashie. His shot

didn't go as high as he'd intended, but, despite that, managed to get over the water trap.

Edwin whistled. 'That was lucky! Must have been an air current or something to keep it airborne.'

'Must have,' Vaughn replied.

'Air current my foot,' Dominic muttered. Or so Edwin thought.

As he walked to the tee, he smiled at the young woman. He'd been doing his best to flirt with her throughout the game, but she was playing hard to get. Well, she was a bit young for him. But very attractive. Tall and blonde, just his style. She seemed to pay more attention to the small Scotsman, though. He shook his head at the thought, and took his swing.

'Ah, bad luck!' Vaughn said.

'Damn.' The ball hadn't quite made it past the trap. He watched as Dominic walked around the pond and then fished the ball out. At least it wasn't lost. Vaughn granted him permission to move the ball out of the trap and continue his shot. But he was gaining in strokes, and that wasn't good.

At the thirteenth hole, Edwin was up by five. He was beginning to despair.

'Believe me, it's very easy to make up shots on the next three holes. You'll be within two of him in no time,' Dominic assured him.

Tobias had chosen a nine-iron for the job, and Dominic just shook his head.

'Do you think you know everything about this game?' Vaughn asked.

'Well,' he replied, 'I have read every book ever written by Eleanor Frost.'

'Indeed. I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with her work. I gather she's a professional golfer?'

Edwin was laughing. 'Um, no, she's a professional gardener. My wife collects her books.' He took the seven-iron, as Dominic had suggested, and got the ball within a yard of the hole. His best shot yet.

Vaughn, however, bested him with a hole-in-one. Edwin was now up by six. He looked over at Dominic, who had a concentrated frown.

The older caddy walked over to the young woman and talked with

her for a bit. She nodded vigorously and then gave Vaughn a dirty look. Edwin wondered what they were talking about.

They'd arrived at hole fourteen. The young woman took the club that Vaughn asked for and handed it to him. Before he could address the ball, however, his caddy screamed. Vaughn and Doublet turned to look where she was pointing.

'Do you see that?' she asked.

'See what?' Vaughn asked, barely suppressing his anger.

'It looked like a, a...' she seemed lost for words, 'wolf. Or something. Sorry, guess it's just a dog.'

Doublet looked at the party she was pointing at. Indeed, they did have a dog. A small Pomeranian. He couldn't figure why she was so frightened by it.

Vaughn turned to her and snarled. 'I'll see to it that you never work as a caddy ever again.'

Doublet watched as Dominic moved away from the tee and whispered something to the girl. He thought he said 'I've got it,' but he wasn't sure.

The interruption had really upset Vaughn as his shot headed straight for the rough. Since there had been interference, Doublet agreed that he could shoot again. But the second shot wasn't much better. After his turn, Doublet was only up by four.

On their way to the seventeenth hole, Dominic regaled them with a story about one of the former owners of the Manor, Cedric Edgerow-Burgess.

'It seems he had made a pact with the Ambassador of Spain. They would supply the troops if he would supply the details of the King's navy.'

'And he did all of this for what reason?' Edwin was incredulous.

'Power. He felt that the king was weak and, with the Spaniard's help, he'd be able to take control of the country.'

'He thought the Spanish would simply give him control of the country once they wrested it from the monarchy?'

Dominic shook his head sadly. 'Foolish, isn't it? We can all see it, why couldn't he?'

'Enough of this chatter,' Vaughn said angrily. 'We're here to play golf, not learn history.'

'I've always felt that one could do both, if one wanted,' the caddy replied.

'This one is NOT interested,' he muttered, as he grabbed his club and walked to the tee.

For some reason, Vaughn's game had deteriorated since the Pom incident. Dominic continued offering comments of support and advice. Edwin hit one under par on the hole and with that, they were tied.

'So, what happens if you two tie?' Dominic asked.

'We play again,' Vaughn said, before Edwin could reply. 'It only seems fair.'

'Really? I would have said the fairest thing to do would be call it a draw.'

'Well, that wouldn't really help young Edwin out, would it?'

Doublet shook his head.

Vaughn turned to the caddy. 'What's the par for this hole?'

'Three.'

'Now that's what a caddy is for, Edwin. Much more sensible than prattling on about who used to live where and what they did with whom, don't you think?'

He took his driver and took a swing. The ball ended up just half a yard from the hole. 'Fantastic!' he shouted. 'Let's see you beat that, Edwin.'

Doublet swallowed hard. There was no way he'd be able to come that close. And even if he did, they'd just have to play this all over again. He knew he couldn't handle the stress a second time.

A quiet voice spoke next to his ear. 'Before you concede the game, at least make an attempt at playing.' Dominic was staring up at him, holding out the eight-iron. Edwin wished he had the older man's confidence. 'You can do it. Aim the ball. Follow through. And don't think about the wager. Think about the sport.'

Doublet set the ball on the tee and got into his stance. He looked over at the others in his party. Dominic was smiling like a proud teacher, Vaughn was scowling, and the young woman was crossing her

fingers for him. He looked back at the ball and swung. He closed his eyes once he finished his follow-through.

'Ah, that looks good,' Dominic said.

'No, it doesn't,' Vaughn replied.

The next thing Edwin heard was the sound of metal bars clanging against each other. He opened his eyes to see Tobias kicking his golf clubs angrily.

'What happened?' he asked, as Dominic rushed over congratulate him.

'Isn't it obvious? A hole in one.' He shook his hand furiously.

Edwin stood gaping for a few moments before laughing out loud. 'That means I won!' He slapped Dominic on the back, hard, but the little fellow hardly noticed.

'Indeed.'

'This calls for a drink. I'm buying.'

While they had their drinks at the Nineteenth Hole (which Vaughn had refused to attend), Dominic described the flight of the ball after Edwin had hit it.

The young caddy said, 'It was a perfect shot. But the best part,' she looked around just to be sure he was gone, 'was when Mr. Vaughn's face turned bright red and he picked up his golf bag and threw it at the Prof... at Dominic.'

'He missed.'

Edwin drained his glass. 'You know, it's a shame we can't make a golf ball that can find its way around. It would certainly help some people out of a tight bind from time to time.'

Dominic tossed a golf ball into the air and caught it. 'Yes, it would, wouldn't it. But it would also ruin one of the finest sports.'

Edwin laughed some more and bought another round of drinks. With his winnings from the game, he was now safely out of debt. And once he could find that killer product, he could say farewell to International Electromatics for good.

The Dominie took a swing at the virtual golf ball and watched it sore into the virtual landscape.

'I think I prefer my own golf balls,' he said, as the virtual ball made a virtual splash.

Alice grinned at him from her seat near the arcade game. 'Cheaters never win, you know.'

She looked back at the paper she was reading.

'Hey Dom, have you seen this?'

'It's possible,' he said, as he fished around for his ball. At least virtual water isn't wet, he mused.

'It's an article about the guy who invented this game you're playing. It's that Doublet bloke you caddied for a year ago.' She thought for a moment. 'Well, several years for him, actually.'

'Ah, interesting.'

Alice watched the Dominie as he swung again at the ball, this time getting it into the hole in one go.

'Lucky shot.'

He scowled at her.

'Anyway, the article details his success despite some hostile takeover attempts from some International Electromatics company. That Vaughn guy, the one you stole those trick golf balls from, he was president of it. Didn't that company go bust recently? Under mysterious circumstances?'

'Mysterious circumstances, eh?'

Alice gave him a sly smile. 'Think we could pop back in time and find out what these circumstances were?'

The Dominic considered the idea. 'No.' He shook his head. 'There are plenty of other mysteries out there to solve...'

Loose Ends

SUE COWLEY

"It is very easy to get ridiculously confused about the tenses of time travel, but most things can be resolved by a sufficiently large ego."

- Terry Pratchett, "The Last Continent"

Sam poked her head out of the TARDIS door, assessed the surroundings and wrinkled her nose in disgust. Before she could protest, however, the Doctor had hustled her over the threshold, studiously avoiding her accusing stare as he made a great show of locking the door.

'Christmas on Earth, you said,' Sam grumbled, shivering as she flicked up the collar of the jacket against the insistent sleety drizzle and reflected that perhaps Hirath hadn't been so bad after all.

'And here we are. Early morning, Christmas Eve...'

'I was expecting something a little more exotic than the Thames. This *is* the Thames, isn't it?'

The Doctor had the decency to look mildly shamefaced before he strode off along the footpath. After a few yards he realised that she wasn't following him and stopped.

Sam tried to look cross. 'Well?'

He waved an arm expansively. 'Hammersmith Bridge,' he said, as if that explained everything.

'I thought you meant somewhere *nice*. Somewhere Christmassy,' Sam continued pointedly. 'Lapland, or a carol service at Kings College. Even New York at a pinch...'

He looked crestfallen, and she forced herself to hide a smile. She'd left Ha'olam with an overwhelming sense of self; a real sense of purpose. But she was tired too, and somehow being back in the TARDIS had diffused her previous urgency. She needed to readjust to the idea of being a time travelling, crime-busting sidekick again; to readjust to the idea of being back in *his* company again. A little quality

time off from saving Civilisation-As-We-Know-It and Doing Good was due. This excursion had been his idea and, though she knew better than to take things at face value, she sensed that perhaps he needed a change of pace as much as she did. But that didn't mean she was about to admit that she wasn't fussy where she spent Christmas as long as it was with him.

'An alpine cabin would have been nice. High in the mountains, a short sleigh ride away from anywhere... Yule logs on a huge roaring fire... Mulled wine and cinnamon toast...'

Sam was really beginning to warm to her theme when she was cut short as the Doctor began to emit a high-pitched bleeping. She watched as he rummaged in his pockets and eventually located the source of the noise - a palm-sized pale pink ovoid which seemed to be decorated with small purple flowers.

'Yes, yes, yes,' he muttered with some irritation. 'I know, I know... I'm here, aren't I?' He pressed a few buttons and the beeping stopped.

'Trouble?' Sam asked, crossing over to him, all pretence of irritation forgotten.

The Doctor frowned distractedly at the object in his hand for a second or two before he tucked it back into his pocket.

'No, no. Not trouble exactly. Just a few... loose ends that need tying up...'

'And that's why we're here?' Sam was disappointed yet unsurprised when he nodded. She waited for an explanation, but none was forthcoming, and so instead she decided to address a more pressing need. 'Do you have an umbrella in those pockets of yours then?'

This drew the Doctor from his reverie and he seemed to notice the inclement weather for the first time. Deftly he produced an umbrella for each of them, seemingly out of thin air: hers was sunshine yellow, his a deep racing green.

'We must get on!' he declared over-loudly, setting off along the path. 'And I need to find a telephone.'

Sam found herself having to break into a run to keep up, as she so often did on such occasions, but as he bounded effortlessly up the slope to the bridge she gave up trying to keep pace with him.

He waited for her at the footpath rail, apparently captivated by the

fast-flowing Thames, which was swollen, grey-green.

And just for a moment it was like seeing him for the first time.

Somehow she'd managed not to notice before now that, uncommonly, he had made a concession to the weather - presumably in the interests of his newly re-fashioned ensemble. The chocolate-brown velvet overcoat he wore was at least two sizes too big for him, and looked as if it had barely scraped through a few lifetimes-worth of adventures. Threadbare in places and patched at the elbows, it reached perilously close to the wet pavement and flapped noisily in the breeze as the wind ruffled his hair. There was a plain-knit black scarf at his throat.

He looks like Heathcliffe, Sam thought, suddenly breathless, then berated herself for entertaining such an absurdly romantic notion. She thought she'd finally got the better of her lustful urges towards him, and was alarmed to discover that a change of clothes had her all turned upside down again. *Just be thankful he's not more sartorially adventurous*, she told herself crossly, joining him at the rail.

'So when are we, exactly?'

'Christmas Eve morning, 1984.' He looked at her and paused for a moment. Then he flung an arm around her shoulders and they set off across the bridge, their umbrellas snagging awkwardly. Sam collapsed hers, illicitly enjoying the notion of sharing his and the closeness it necessitated.

But however pleasant their stroll was, she sensed prevarication in the air, and after a few paces couldn't resist prompting, 'So?'

'Time travel is a tricky thing sometimes, Sam,' he began awkwardly.

'Tell me something I don't already know. Not a million miles away there's it four year old me sitting in an airing cupboard surrounded, by prematurely unwrapped Christmas presents...'

He smiled. 'Not very good at surprises are you?'

'Only when I know what they are. And I don't like secrets either - so lets hear it.'

He hesitated, apparently unsure how to explain himself. 'You know I often come here...'

'Hammersmith?'

'Earth! This is my favourite planet...'

'You're obviously a man of fine taste...'

'...But I haven't ever been strictly chronological about things...'

'Isn't it a bit late in the day to start worrying about your lifestyle choices?'

'Oh, it's never too late to start worrying...' He stopped, as if interrupted by the boisterous voice of an unseen third party.

("That's precisely what I would have done! ")

'...And sometimes... sometimes I sense... echoes. Evidence of my own presence, yet to come. Of things I have yet to do...' He trailed off, and for a moment Sam had the absurd impression that he was ashamed to tell her any more.

'And I have this...' From his pocket, the Doctor took the pink object (which looked suspiciously to Sam like the 'My Secret Diary' personal organisers that had been all the rage at Coal Hill one term) and prodded fretfully at a few buttons. '...to remind me what I have to do, and when.'

In the awkward silence that fell, Sam had an inspired thought. 'This is like Bill and Ted getting Joan of Arc and Napoleon out of jail, isn't it?'

The Doctor frowned deeply and Sam laughed. It was all too easy to forget he might not be familiar with every inch of the cultural wallpaper she'd grown up with, although sometimes she suspected he was just feigning that ignorance to appear more, well, human.

She discovered that they had meandered to a stop in the middle of the bridge, and took some time to reflect on what he had said.

'Isn't it dangerous to be messing around with your own time stream?' she asked at last.

'It's the price I pay for my freedom,' he said heavily, with what Sam felt was unnecessary drama. 'The Web of Time must be preserved. I must watch for the signs and ensure that Time follows its true course. To not do so could be catastrophic...'

'...And create a paradox, the results of which could cause a chain reaction that would unravel the very fabric of the space-time continuum and destroy the entire universe...' Sam finished with a breathless grin.

The Doctor gave her a hard stare, his expression unreadable.

She shrugged, regretting her flippancy. 'Just a lucky guess.'

'You don't seem to be taking this very seriously,' he reproached, abruptly walking away, leaving Sam to struggle with her umbrella to avoid getting wet.

She dashed after him, alarmed. This wasn't like him at all. 'Hey!'

The Doctor stalked on in silence, so Sam ran ahead of him and stood in his path.

'I'm sorry,' she blurted out. He stopped and looked down at her, tight-lipped. In that moment she couldn't fathom why she found him even remotely attractive. 'And don't sulk. It doesn't become you.'

The Doctor's gaze flitted away up river. Sleet pattered on their umbrellas and traffic rumbled by, unnoticed.

'Are you going to tell me what this is all about?' Sam asked at last.

The Doctor continued to gaze up river as her answered her. 'I misjudged someone. And he died. Or rather, he will die. I could have saved him if I'd acted differently, but I made the wrong choice.'

'People die all the time,' said Sam, her conviction faltering mid-sentence as she heard the *cliché* ring hollow in her own ears. 'Even you can't stop that.'

'Today I have to make sure that he dies, Sam. I have to complete the loop - and by doing so I condemn him to death.'

This just wasn't right. He was her hero. He was supposed to snatch people from the jaws of death at the eleventh hour, not help them on their way.

'But it's either him or the paradox, right?' Sam was horrified to hear the desperate tone of her own voice.

The Doctor closed his eyes and did not reply.

'No one says you have to enjoy doing the Right Thing,' Sam told his back softly, finding herself on the verge of tears. She flushed hotly, wondering how she had ever doubted him, even for a second. She wanted to hold him, tell him that it would be all right, that she understood, and that wouldn't ever think any less of him because he had to do what the situation demanded of him.

But she recalled his bemused look when she had kissed him on Ha'olam, and knew that she could never reach him. So instead she

stood frozen, helpless and shut out, watching his shoulders, which were set and unmoving against the heavy grey sky.

And at length he turned back to her, and it seemed that the crisis was passed.

'I've got a lot to do,' he said, his eyes bright with manufactured enthusiasm for the task ahead. 'We must get on.'

They walked along in silence to the end of the bridge and along Hammersmith Bridge Road, until they reached a phone box. The Doctor produced a credit card with Sam's name on it.

'Merry Christmas,' he said with a smile that almost reached his eyes.

Sam had expected something like this, and knew that there was nothing she could say to change his mind, though she wasn't about to let that stop her trying.

'There must be something I can do to help?'

He shook his head slowly. 'One of the things I have to do is take some equipment over to Totter's Lane.' Sam's eyes widened in surprise. 'I think it's better if you do your own thing, don't you?'

'But...' Sam didn't feel able to back down immediately, even if the thought of visiting her own neighbourhood thirteen or so years out of time brought her out in goosebumps.

'And I believe that once your parents have extricated little Sam from the airing cupboard you and your family will be off to your grandparents home in Bedfordshire, so there's no danger of you accidentally bumping into yourself today...'

Sam pulled a face and gave a theatrical shudder.

'So I suggest you set about spending as much money as possible before the end of the day.' He waggled the Visa card invitingly before her nose and cheated by smiling.

She gave in ungraciously, and took the card from him. 'You might be sorry,' she warned him.

'Its too late for that,' he returned darkly. Then, 'I'll meet you in the Old City Arms this evening.'

She nodded solemnly, resigned. 'Can I get you anything?'

He made a pantomime of thinking about it, scratching his head and frowning. 'Smarties,' he said eventually, with a hint of a smile.

Sam grinned despite herself. 'Right. Well... I'll see you later then.' She set off, making a point of not looking back.

The Doctor watched Sam disappear out of sight, his face shuttered. Absently he patted his pockets and eventually withdrew a thick notebook and a handful of loose change.

An observer might have fancied they imagined the faintest glimmer of a smile on his face as he let his umbrella down and ducked into the phone box.

Inside, his actions were swift and purposeful, dialling the meticulously researched number without hesitation. The call was answered almost immediately.

'Good morning,' the Doctor said, with an enthusiasm Sam would not have credited. 'I wonder if I might speak to Detective Sergeant Russell please?'

If someone had asked her, Sam would have said that the last thing she needed or wanted was to be parted from the Doctor again so soon. To her surprise however, she found her day curiously enjoyable. There was something extremely reassuring about being immersed in her own past on her home planet, about recognising every song she heard in every shop (even if nine times out of ten it was *Do They Know It's Christmas*). It was like visiting a total-immersion theme park that had got inside her head and shamelessly played on every nostalgic fibre in her body.

She browsed endlessly, allowing herself to be swept into a festive frenzy by the tides of people who thronged on the streets it last minute panic. It was madness, but its familiarity was somehow comforting. And she was spared all the pressures apparent in others all around her. Sure enough, tomorrow was Christmas Day, but if she missed it she could always get the Doctor to bring her back again. They could have Christmas every day, or not at all, if they chose. It was only another way of marking time, after all, like birthdays and anniversaries. And they lost all their significance when Time was your playground. They only mattered if you stood still long enough for them to catch you up.

She'd started marking time again on Ha'olam, and was glad so be

free of it.

She found herself fixated in one particular shop when she recognised a dress her Mum used to wear. With a disarming flush of enlightenment, it somehow made her parents real people instead of just 'Mum and Dad', and she felt her first genuine pangs of homesickness. But even that felt good somehow, renewed her Sense of Self. And more than that: here she had a Sense of Place too. However far the TARDIS took her, Earth was her home, and it would always welcome her back.

She bought new jeans and discovered a Frankie T-shirt on a sale rail that she decided it would be archly ironic to own (she'd inherited one from a cousin which she'd worn as a nightshirt when she was eight or nine). Then she spotted a slinky green jersey dress that looked suitably festive, and caused havoc at the till when she asked the cashier to cut the outrageous shoulder pads out of it for her.

She did her best not to think about the Doctor all day. She was speared with acute embarrassment every time she thought of how she'd kissed him. Not that he'd said anything... and that was really the problem. It had been such a big deal for her, yet he gave no sign that he understood how she felt. He'd looked bemused. Not shocked, not passionate and not even repulsed. Anything would have been better than bemused. She'd felt utterly crushed.

And yet. Somehow it had helped. She had her answer, even if it wasn't the one she wanted. She still loved him, but she understood now that he was as unattainable as the Sun, and just as impossible to reach. His guileless detachment was no longer a challenge to be met but a truth to be fostered.

A policeman was standing at the end of the bridge on the opposite side of the road when the Doctor returned just before 11p.m.

'Good evening, Officer!'

The policeman failed to acknowledge the Doctor's jovial greeting, and instead turned on his heel and began walking purposefully back across the bridge.

The freezing rain had eased off at last, but the air was bitter and damp. The Doctor peered after the policeman, his breath frosted in a

cloud around him. Traffic was sparse. Strings of tiny white lights lent the bridge a festive jolliness he did not feel, and a large sign informed him that the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham wished him a Merry Christmas.

The Doctor walked onto the bridge with the air of a child returning to school on the first day of term after the summer holidays, scuffing his boots noisily along the pavement, eyes fixed on his toes.

At length he was forced to pull himself up short as a pair of shiny boots appeared in his field of vision. The Doctor looked up into the expressionless face of a second policeman.

'Officer...' he acknowledged with half a grin, side-stepping to allow the uniformed constable to resume his beat, and suppressing an urge to doff the hat he wasn't given to wearing in this body. It was definitely a hat moment.

The policeman continued on his way without a word, and the Doctor turned to watch him go.

'Doctor?'

The Doctor spun round in surprise at the voice suddenly at his shoulder. The man he had come to meet was clad in black and somehow contrived to lurk in shadows that weren't there. Turning, they stood, shoulder to shoulder, looking out over the water.

'You came then. I wasn't sure if you would. You're looking... well.'

The man gave a rich laugh. 'Spare me the social pleasantries, Doctor.'

'Good manners cost nothing.'

'Unlike my time...'

'Which I've already agreed to pay you for,' the Doctor snapped with irritation. He paused and then added in a more measured tone, 'It seemed the only way to ensure you would meet me.'

'What is it you want, Doctor?' Already the voice was weary, apparently impatient to be away.

'You're right, of course. There's little to be gained from pretending to be nice to each other. You did try to shoot me the last time we met, after all.' The Doctor produced a bulky manila envelope from inside his coat and held it out to the figure at his side. 'Your way off this planet.'

The rich laugh came again, hearty, as the man took the package.

'Whatever makes you think that I want to leave?'

'I don't suppose you do. That's why I won't waste my time trying to persuade you to come with me now.'

'A wise decision.'

'But you might well change your mind In time. Perhaps sooner than you think.'

'And why should I trust you?'

'You don't imagine I like the thought of you being here, do you?' the Doctor demanded tightly. 'You don't belong here.'

'And you feel that's somehow your responsibility?'

Sensing he was being mocked, the Doctor remained silent.

'You Time Lords are such an arrogant btmch of interfering old hypocrites!'

The Doctor turned slowly, his face set, his eyes cold and flat. 'You're entitled to your opinion of course,' he said, looking past the man, through him. 'I've done what I came to do.'

With nothing more to say, the Doctor wheeled around and headed back across the bridge.

He found Sam waiting for him in the shadow of the elaborate buttress at the end of the bridge. She swamped him in an enthusiastic hug.

'Had a good day?' he enquired with a small smile, once she released him.

'You could say that,' Sam allowed, presenting him with his box of Smarties. 'How about you?'

'I did what had to be done.' He didn't sound pleased, but he did sound sure. That made Sam feel better.

'Life isn't all orange Smarties.'

He frowned, looking momentarily bewildered. Then he flipped open the box she had given him and gestured for her to hold her hand out. She did so, amused. He gave the box a shake.

In the amber glow of the streetlights, all the Smarties that tumbled into her palm appeared to be orange.

Sam smiled.

Time Gained, Time Lost

John S. Drew

The time rotor rose and fell in an almost hypnotic pattern for Ian Chesterton as he stood by and watched the Doctor at work on the console. His head bobbed up and down in time with the rhythm of the column. Ian's thoughts drifted to a brisk afternoon watching a cricket game at the pub with a pint of bitter. A smile of fond, old memories crossed his lips.

The Doctor had promised that this time, he had found a way to return Ian and his companion, Barbara Wright, to their proper place and time on Earth, London, 1963. He was quite confident as he walked around the multi-sided control panel, flicking switches and pressing buttons. However, only recently, the Doctor made the same boast, but his efforts caused the TARDIS to land in the middle of the French Revolution.

Despite his desire to go home, Ian couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret. The Doctor had taken Ian and Barbara to some exotic locations in time and space in the past year. From the planet Skaro, home of the Daleks, to Marinus, to recently, the French Revolution. If the Doctor were truly successful this time, Ian wondered what the simple life of being a Coal Hill schoolteacher would be like after everything he had experienced. He thought about how he would miss the hum of the console room, the sound of the TARDIS doors opening as they set out to explore a new world, and the inquisitive 'Hmmm?' the Doctor so often uttered.

The Doctor looked at Ian and smiled. 'Almost there, my boy. Would you please tell Susan and Barbara that we should be touching down in about five minutes?'

Ian was impressed by the Doctor's confidence. He had never seen the old man so sure of himself before. Perhaps this time, they were going to make it. He turned and walked out of the console room, running a hand along the wall, which was studded with numerous equal

sized roundels. Ian always thought it a curious architectural design. There was so much about the Doctor he still didn't know, even after a year of travelling with the man and his granddaughter, Susan.

Ian stopped before Barbara Wright's room, the door slightly ajar. Susan was brushing her former teacher's dark hair and Ian could see the tears streaming down the teen's cheeks. He caught Barbara's reflection in the mirror and saw that she too was crying. 'Oh, Barbara,' Susan said, trying hard not to burst out into total sobs, 'I don't know what I shall do without you and Ian. It's going to be so lonely in the TARDIS.'

'I'll miss you too, Susan,' Barbara replied. 'But you still have your grandfather. You have to look after him.'

'I will, but it just won't be the same.'

'No, it won't will it?' Barbara whispered.

Their silence was Ian's cue to knock on the door and issue a warning cough.

'Not interrupting anything important, am I ladies?' he asked with a slight smile.

The two quickly wiped away their tears as Barbara rose from her chair. 'Just girl talk.'

'Well, the Doctor wanted me to inform you that we'll be touching down in London in less than five minutes.'

Susan and Barbara looked at each other.

'So soon?' Susan asked.

Ian nodded. 'I'm afraid so. Your grandfather seems very confident this time.'

Susan turned away, trying to fight back the tears that were forming once more. 'Yes, I think he's managed to do it.'

Ian stepped forward. 'It's going to be all right, Susan.'

Susan cried out and ran into his arms. Ian held her tight as Barbara stepped forward and embraced them both.

The scanner showed the river Thames stretched out before them. The familiar sight invoked a number of emotions in Ian. He didn't know what to say, but the silence of the room as they stared at the monitor was too much. 'It's London all right,' he said simply.

The Doctor glanced over his instruments, muttering in irritation to himself.

'What is it?' Barbara asked.

'Nothing,' the Time Lord answered, gesturing the schoolteacher away from his side with a shooing motion. Barbara stood her ground. 'It is London?'

The Doctor threw up his arms in exasperation. 'Of course, it is. Don't ask such silly questions when your eyes give you an accurate report on the events happening!'

'Then what's the matter?' Barbara asked.

Ian saw the look the two exchanged. Quite often every member of the TARDIS crew traded words of argument with tile Doctor, but both Susan and Ian knew when to let a matter go. Barbara knew too, she simply refused to let it lie. The silent visual exchange portrayed a great battle of wills, with no quarter being given by either side.

The Doctor tried to end the matter with a dismissive gesture and a turning of his back to Barbara, but she wouldn't hear it. She turned to face him again.

'Well?'

The Doctor rolled his eyes. 'This is London,' he replied a defeated sigh, 'but I do not believe it is the correct year.'

'Well, that's all right,' Ian replied, trying to intervene Barbara's oncoming burst of annoyance. 'How far off could we be? It looks like our London. What's the time difference? Five years.'

'More, I'm afraid,' the Doctor answered quickly. 'But I shan't know until we've stepped outside.' He reached for the control that activated the large double door. They swung open in a jerky motion. 'You may wait here while I investigate.'

'Nothing doing,' Barbara said, reaching for her coat. 'I'm going with you. Whether it's my year or not, it's home. And I want to see it.'

The Doctor made to respond and stopped. Ian saw in the old man's eyes that he knew better than to continue the argument. 'Very well. But do try not to interact with the general population until we have ascertained the year. If it's too far in the past, you run the risk of interference and upsetting the time line.'

'Have we ever?' Barbara asked.

'Yes,' the Doctor answered a little too quickly and testily. 'Yes, you have.'

The four stepped out of the police box to a familiar sight. Susan squealed in delight as they scanned the industrial buildings that lined the river Thames. 'Oh, Ian, Barbara! You're home! It's London!'

'Steady on, Susan,' the Doctor warned. 'We don't know what year it is.'

'But look at it, grandfather,' Susan persisted. 'We didn't stay here for long, but I remember coming down along the edge of the river and looking out at these huge buildings. Even though it looks so dreary, I enjoyed the silence of the riverfront and the congruity of the buildings. It helped me to think.'

The Doctor turned to see the looks of sadness on his two companions faces. 'What's the matter?'

Barbara turned away. Ian gestured towards the buildings. 'We're in the past,' he replied simply.

'I don't understand,' Susan said quickly. 'How can you tell? It all looks the same to me.'

Barbara turned back to face them, tears of frustration streaming down her cheeks. 'The raids on London. The damage is still there.'

The Doctor scanned the buildings with greater care. Indeed, he saw the charred remains of a number of buildings, victims of the German Luftwaffe attacks of the planet's World War II. He closed his eyes and uttered a silent oath of anger. 'I am sorry,' he said aloud.

'We might even be in the middle of the war,' Ian suggested, 'In which case this is not a safe place to be.'

'It's too quiet for that, Ian,' Barbara said. 'I remember the air raid sirens warning us to take shelter when I was a child. If there was any danger, we'd be hearing something by now.'

'Nevertheless, I suggest we get back into the TARDIS until we can figure this all out.'

A gusting wind picked up the folds of Barbara's coat as well as a selection of debris that lay along the bank of the river. The Doctor bent down and grabbed at a page from a newspaper as it drifted by. 'London Times, January 5, 1945.'

'Then the war is over,' Susan said, recalling her history lessons of earth.

'Yes, but we are still too far back in time for these two,' the Doctor murmured, glancing at the contents of the page.

'Yes,' Ian agreed, 'We are.'

'Then I say we take up young Chesterton's suggestion and return to the ship,' the Doctor answered, stepping towards the police box.

'No.'

The tone of Barbara's voice caused everyone to halt in their tracks.

'Barbara?' Ian asked.

The schoolteacher turned her head towards her companion. 'We're home, Ian. I'm not going.'

'This isn't home, Barbara,' Ian protested. 'This is our history.'

'It's close enough,' Barbara said simply. 'Ian, this is earth, our earth, in a time we're familiar with.'

'But we exist in this time period already, Barbara! We're children here.'

'That doesn't matter to me, Ian.' Barbara explained. She looked towards the Doctor. 'This may be the closest we get to our own time period, Doctor. You can't guarantee that you'll ever get us home, can you? I think we should at least talk about the possibility of staying.'

Ian saw that Barbara was serious in what she was saying. Deep inside, there was that part of him that wanted to agree with her wholeheartedly. Looking out at the familiar sights of the Thames, though tarnished by the ravages of the war, brought about an urge to stay.

The Doctor stepped forward. 'I can't force you to come with me, you know. But I will say this. Don't make any rash decisions until you've had time to check out what you will be getting yourselves into here.'

Church bells peeled in the distance. A smile crossed Barbara's lips. 'The Mary-Le-Bow.'

'An old church,' Ian explained. 'The bells were a signal to put out all fires for the night.'

They listened to the chimes a moment. The Doctor placed a hand on Ian's shoulder. 'Go,' he urged. 'See your world, your home. See if this is where you want to stay. Susan and I will do a little sightseeing. We

shall meet back here at the TARDIS tomorrow evening at this same time.'

'That sounds fair,' Ian replied.

Barbara didn't answer, but merely nodded. Ian saw the look on her face and was quite familiar with it. She had made up her mind. This twenty-four hour period was merely a formality to her. In her mind, she was home.

Ian watched as Barbara shivered slightly as they walked down Saint James's Park towards the bandstand. She refused his numerous offers of his raincoat, preferring, she said, 'to let the familiar chill wash over me.' Indeed, despite her apparent discomfort, a warm smile crossed her lips.

'Barbara, it's damp and freezing out here,' Ian urged, trying to slip off his coat yet again.

'Yes, it is,' Barbara said simply, placing a hand out to stop him. 'But there's nothing else quite like a nippy London morning in the entire universe.'

They had spent the entire evening walking throughout the city, venturing into a few watering holes that had managed to remain open during the war. Many had closed during the conflict due to lack of business. After downing a few pints of bitter at a place called the Red Lark Pub, they made their way to a hostel. Ian forgot how good it was to sleep in a bed made of down pillows and spring mattresses after months of either sleeping in makeshift beds or the uncomfortable cots on board the TARDIS. The two would have slept through the day except for the hostel owner needing the room for incoming guests.

After a hearty breakfast of 'bangers, mash and some blood pudding for good measure, all downed with several large cups of tea, the two continued their wandering. The conversation had been mostly about the history of the time they were walking through. Barbara would point out some interesting site and give Ian a lecture on its history. The science teacher tried on several occasions to broach the subject of their situation, but Barbara always managed to manoeuvre her way out with a quick diversion.

Much of St. James remained the way the two remembered it,

except for the repairs being made from the bombings during the war. If the two had travelled further east through the park past Duck Island; aptly named for the variety of ducks that inhabited the small inlet on the eastern end of the park's lake, they would reach Downing Street, home of Prime Minster Winston Churchill.

Ian cast a mischievous glance at Barbara. 'What say we pay him a visit?'

Barbara's eyes opened wide with fear. 'We dare not, Ian! You know how dangerous that could be! Why, if we were to meet the man and by accident let any knowledge of the future slip out! You know the Doctor is forever warning us to be careful!'

'Exactly,' Ian answered, all joking aside, 'which is why we cannot stay here. The risk is too great.'

Barbara's eyes narrowed in anger at being tricked. 'There is no risk if we keep a low profile.'

Ian laughed. 'Low profile? And how do you intend to do that, Barbara? We are two people out of time, literally out of our element here. We were fortunate enough that the Doctor had some money of the time to give us for spending cash. We would look very silly handing them pound notes from 1962! What are we going to do about money?'

'We can work. We're teachers!'

'And how do we explain ourselves on the job interview? I can't provide any references as they are not in positions of authority yet.' Ian snapped his fingers. 'Or how about our certification? We say, 'Trust us, we'll have it in roughly twenty years."

'Now you're making fun of me,' Barbara said, tears forming in her eyes.

'No,' Ian replied. 'I'm not. But I'm trying to show you just how risky and difficult staying here would be.'

'We can't stay with the Doctor either!' Barbara shouted. 'How much further can we go on? How much longer is it going to take to actually get us home? That's if he ever does!' She took in a deep breath and sighed. 'I'm tired, Ian. Tired of all the wandering. I want to settle down.'

Ian reached out and put his arms around her. 'I do too, Barbara. I'm not saying I don't. I just don't think that this is the right place for us.'

'It's home, Ian. It's where we belong. It's our people. It's close

enough to our time to suit me. I can handle the rest'

'Can you?' Ian asked.

Barbara turned and looked towards Duck Island. They walked on further into the park in silence.

A school bell chimed, signalling the start of a school day. The sounds of children laughing drew the attention of the two teachers as they walked down Shoreditch Road. Barbara remained angry for some time after her exchange with Ian. But as they wandered along the road, her features softened and a smile grew on her lips.

'Ian! Ian, look!'

She pointed down the street to a sight that was very familiar to Ian. Children were passing through the gates of the Coal Hill School.

'Ian! It's our school!' Barbara grew excited. 'You can't tell me this isn't home!'

Ian smiled too as he remembered how he looked forward to the first day of school, putting on his school tie for the first time after summer recess and admiring himself in the mirror. His memory clouded as he watched the students entering. Ian shook his head. 'It isn't. Barbara, this isn't our school! We're not employed here! We can't be employed here!'

'We could be, Ian!' Barbara replied. 'We could take the exams for our certification again and...'

Ian pointed at the students, stopping Barbara in mid-sentence. The student body was made up entirely of girls.

'It's before the school went co-ed,' Ian replied softly.

'Well,' Barbara muttered, turning away from the school. 'It doesn't matter. It's still the Coal Hill School.'

'It's another example of how wrong this all is, Barbara,' Ian said. Seeing the look of disappointment on her face, he took her hand. 'Come on, I know of one more place we can visit. Maybe it'll make us both feel like we're home.'

Ian opened the door to Harry's shop and allowed Barbara to step in. She smiled in remembrance as she stepped through doorway.

'Oh, Ian, it's just as I remember it,' Barbara gushed.

'Yeah, good old Harry's,' Ian said gesturing her towards a table.

Barbara settled into her seat and looked around her. 'There are some differences. The jukebox is missing. So is the specials board.'

'Specials?' a gruff voice called out. 'What kind of specials are you talking about?'

'Oh,' Barbara said, startled at the sight of a younger Harry, owner of the small cafe that she, Ian and the other teachers from the Coal Hill School often frequented. 'I'm sorry. I was looking to see if you were offering any special dishes today.'

'Specials,' Harry sneered. 'Where have you been? We're still rationing here, recovering from the Germans.'

'Oh, that's right,' Barbara replied weakly. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't say you're sorry, young lady,' Harry snorted with a gruffness that seemed uncharacteristic for the man they knew. 'Say you'll do your part to get Britain back up on her feet. Damn Nazis.' Harry walked off, muttering to himself.

Barbara picked up her menu and looked at the offerings, which were scarce. A number of items had been crossed off with a pen. 'I forgot how bad it was just after the war. But that didn't seem like Harry. He always had a smile and a story to tell us. In fact, I remember how he told us a number of war stories. There always seemed to be a romantic air to them.'

'That's Harry, all right,' Ian said. 'We were too young to really be affected by what happened during the war, but Harry lived it. He experienced it...'

'But he never seemed like that in our time.'

'There's your answer. Time. Time heals all wounds they say, or it manages to blur the memories at least. The Harry we knew had buried many of his ghosts. This Harry is still hurting. Many of the people of this time are hurting, Barbara, and they will for some time. We're going to have to live with that too.' Ian took Barbara's hands and held them tightly. 'Can you honestly say you can live with all this? This isn't our time...'

Barbara pulled her hands away from Ian and picked up a menu as Harry re-approached their table. 'I'd like a cup of tea, please and a tuna fish sandwich.'

Barbara said very little to Ian as they walked along the River Thames towards the TARDIS. Ian noted the setting sun and the chiming of the Mary Le-Bow. He fought back an urge to make a go of living in this time period. There were no guarantees of ever returning to his time if he and Barbara climbed back inside the time machine. There was the possibility that the two could make it living in London of the past.

But it simply wasn't home.

'Barbara, I...' Ian started, but halted as his companion's complexion went milk white. 'What is it?'

Barbara's only reply was a pointed finger towards a couple walking towards them. A little girl of about four skipped happily before them.

Ian's face twisted in puzzlement. 'So? I don't understand.'

Barbara remained silent as they watched the scene before them. The little girl, decked out in her Sunday best, was sliding away from her parents, edging ever closer to the river's edge. A number of ducks were gathered near where the water shallow. The little girl rushed towards them, calling out to them…

'I still don't understand...' Ian said, but Barbara only shushed him.

The little girl's parents were oblivious to what was going on. They didn't see their daughter reaching the edge of the river leaning forward, trying to get the ducks' attention.

But Ian noticed it. 'She's too close to the water.' He started to call out, but Barbara stopped him.

'No, Ian. You can't.'

'She could get hurt,' Ian replied.

Barbara's face clouded up with sadness. 'She will.'

The little girl toppled forward and fell face first into the water. The ducks scattered, quacking in annoyance.

This drew the parents from their discussion. The father turned to utter a warning, 'Don't get too close to the ducks,' just as he saw his daughter thrashing about, moving into deeper water. He immediately ran into the water and scooped up his sputtering daughter. Her mother met them on the edge of the river, fretting about her poor daughter. The little girl was now crying as she pressed herself against her father, trying to fight off the shivering that racked her body.

'Why did you stop me?' Ian asked. 'I could have helped that little

girl.'

'You would have done more harm than good,' Barbara only replied. 'Look, here comes the Doctor and Susan.'

The two aliens approached the schoolteachers. The Doctor pulled out his key from his pocket.

'Well, now, after a day of walking about this time, have you still the same resolve to stay here, Barbara?'

'Open the door, please, Doctor, and let's get out of here.'

The Doctor was taken aback by Barbara's abruptness, but he quickly complied. 'Very well.'

The four boarded the time machine with Susan closing the door behind her. A moment later, the vehicle faded away with a low rumble.

Inside the TARDIS, Susan hugged Barbara excitedly. 'I'm so glad you decided to stay, Barbara, but what made you change our mind.'

'Watching Ian just a few moments ago. He was ready to help that little girl, but he couldn't.'

'Well, I think the situation was a little different there, Barbara. I doubt I would have affected history all that much.'

Tears welled up in Barbara's eyes. 'Maybe not dramatically, but it might have changed things. You see, that little girl was me. I learned a lesson that day. I learned to be more careful; that I could get hurt. There are things in this world that can hurt me. It was a sad lesson to learn at such 'a young age. The experience also taught my parents a lesson. The war may have been over, but they should never let their guard down when it comes to protecting me. They were so wrapped up in their conversation; they didn't see what was happening to me. It never happened again.'

'Oh, Barbara, I'm sorry,' Ian said.

'It's all right,' she replied. 'It was then I realised I couldn't stay behind. Because no matter how well intentioned we might be, we could unknowingly change the lives of the people around us, altering history even in the smallest way and quite possibly not for the better. I didn't want that on my hands.' Barbara stifled a yawn. 'Well, I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. I could do with a good night's sleep.'

'You're right,' Ian said as he walked towards the door leading further into the TARDIS. 'Good night everyone.'

'Coming, Grandfather?' Susan asked.

'I'll be along in a minute,' the Doctor replied, as he stepped back over to the console. 'I just want to make sure our path through the vortex is clear.'

'All right,' Susan said, giving her grandfather a kiss on the cheek. She turned and exited the room.

'Oh, Barbara,' the Doctor called out. 'Stay a moment. I'm glad you decided not to remain in London.'

'You know something, Doctor, I am too.'

'It wouldn't be the same without you.'

Barbara nodded. 'But there will come a day when we will part company.'

The Doctor's face lit up, a twinkle forming in his eyes. 'There will. But until that day, let us enjoy the times we have together. We have some interesting adventures ahead of us.'

'You say this as though you know what will happen next.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I know no such thing. But in the TARDIS, almost anything can happen.'

Barbara gently kissed the Doctor on the cheek. 'Good night, Doctor.'

The Doctor's eyes sparkled. 'Good night, my dear.'

Barbara exited the room as the Doctor continued with his work.

MIKE FICHERA

Fear and Logarithms in Las Vegas

Matt Fitton

These were strange times, mused Artie Holden as he took a slurp from his gin. Gangsters acted like movie stars, movie stars wanted to be gangsters, and Vegas was one of those places where the line was a little more blurred.

He gazed across the gaming hall at the tall man with the curly hair standing at the roulette table. He'd been watching him for an hour now and he was sure this guy was neither. He didn't have the clothes, or the attitude, of a mobster; and, despite the rumours, he was like no-one from Hollywood Artie had ever met. There was something about the way he was playing, the way he handled the bills and the chips, something different from the way that everyone Artie had ever seen in a casino - and he'd been in quite a few - usually acted...

There was no desperation. No longing. No greed. That was it, Artie decided, it was the money - this guy was different from all the other punters in the joint because he didn't seem to care about the money, just the numbers. Yeah, that's what made him stand out... that, and the scarf.

And the tin dog.

He was even starting to impress himself now, thought the Doctor as he counted out his meagre stack of chips on the green baize surface. He'd finished building his own version of Professor Marius' mobile computer some time ago, but had kept it under wraps for fear of offending the highly-strung original who'd been travelling with him. Having recently parted company from both K9 and Leela on Gallifrey, the Doctor had relished the chance to test out his own creation. And it was performing admirably.

He'd had the idea for putting K9 through his paces with a random probability programme generated in the TARDIS, but then on a whim decided his new automaton could do with testing its interactive skills as well. Where better to combine practice of people skills and probability

theory than in a good old-fashioned casino?

Admittedly, surroundings were a little more old-fashioned than the Doctor had hoped, and he'd had to tone down the interactive part for fear of scaring the life out of people, but he thought he'd adapted well thus far. In fact he'd told K9 just this morning that he should consider it more of an undercover challenge: to pass unnoticed in a technologically unenlightened age.

He watched the flicker of sub-infra-red digits on K9's side screen approvingly. Having a machine talking to him in number sequences next to a roulette table in 1950's Las Vegas was a little ostentatious even for the Doctor's taste. Flashing numbers would have been just as bad, so he'd set the display to a range just beyond the spectrum visible to humans.

Everything seemed to be working perfectly. To be fair, calculating probabilities for extended runs of numbers throughout the five basic dimensions should have been child's play for any adding machine worth its silicon, but the Doctor didn't mind admitting how seamlessly he'd managed to knit everything together. Yes, he might even go so far as to say this was a definite improvement on the original.

He took a sip of his lemonade and gave a grin and a wave to a couple that were staring at him from around a neighbouring craps table. The place was still very quiet, but that suited him perfectly. Keep a low profile, he thought, shrugging his scarf into a more comfortable position.

He had hinted yesterday to a couple of the waiters and dealers that he was here on a break from Hollywood and was more than happy to lose some of his vast fortunes. As for K9, the Doctor was relying on the punters having seen some of the glut of science-fiction movies that his hazy memory told him were in vogue in this period.

'*Klaatu barada nikto*' indeed - he was only glad that the Draconians hadn't yet seen fit to make contact. In their ancient tongue, the phrase implied something rather derogatory about one's close relationship with chickens. Or was it domestically reared animals in general...? No matter, he'd been only too happy to point that out to the future Earth council and so avoid embarrassing cultural exchanges...

'Fifteen, black, odd.'

The Doctor sighed as another few of his chips were claimed by the house, but was cheered to see K9's calculations adjust accordingly. At last he was beginning to feel relaxed: no civilisations to save, no racing against time to stop the evil plot of some renegade alien - just a delicious cold glass of home-made lemonade, and the simple pleasure of being proved right every once in a while by the random fall of a ball. Well, to be truthful, that particular pleasure was still something he had to look forward to, but he didn't really mind. In fact, the Doctor was so relaxed, he hardly noticed the half-dozen heavily-armed gangsters sweep through the games room and up the staircase that led off the far end. No, he thought to himself, I'm sure that sort of thing happens all the time.

Sammy Fabrizi knew that he was running out of time, and but more immediately, he was running pretty low on patience. He didn't mind so much that when he'd arrived in the summer of '51 most people had assumed he was part of the mob - his name, appearance, and the fact that he owned a casino on the infamous Las Vegas Strip all pointed to some underworld connection.

In fact, it had helped at first: punters always paid up and both the Chicago families and the New York wiseguys had left him pretty much alone when he'd first arrived in town. But the reality was that he was one of the few independent players left in Vegas: a businessman who'd got lucky in stocks out east and decided to buy into the glamorous boomtown Vegas had become. Reality was working long hours in a joint with slow returns, and an ever-slowing flow of customers through the doors, where the presence of real mobsters had crept closer month by month. So close in fact that the competition across the street was scaring off his staff and his customers. It was getting harder by the day to eke out an honest living. Like today for instance: like having his office intruded upon by Benny 'the Bullet' Santana and a bunch of his goons for the third time this week.

Fabrizi remained seated as the men piled in, taking up various positions round the room. His own guys hung back - one of their number had spent time in Phoenix hospital after challenging Santana on

one of his first little visits, and Fabrizi knew he couldn't pay them enough to put that in the job description. He rolled his eyes ceilingwards and made a show of brushing some invisible speck off the knee of his cream suit pants.

'I'd offer you guys something to drink, but the maid's already emptied the bedpan.'

The squat sweating figure of Santana placed his hands on the table and leant far enough over for Fabrizi to smell cheap cologne losing the battle with his body odour. Santana liked to think he dressed like a movie gangster, expensive pinstripe, with dark fedora, spats and Italian shoes - he just didn't have the frame, the looks, or the taste to carry it

off.

'Save it, Sammy.' Santana spoke with voice partway between a grunt and a wheeze - even after knowing the guy for the best part of a year, Fabrizi couldn't tell if he was putting it on.

'I oughta let you know the offer's still on the table, but it ain't gonna be there forever. The interested parties are in town today, and it would be good to give them an answer. Personally.'

Fabrizi had heard that some of the New York bigshots were coming to town to take a look at their investments, with a view to expansion. So, it wasn't just talk after all.

'You already got my answer,' Fabrizi tried to look Santana full in the face, but couldn't avoid a view of the rolls of fat hanging over the other man's collar. 'The Pelican's not for sale.'

'We're already offering over the odds. I hear that trade's not been too good lately. Hoods with guns wandering through the place, making threats, intimidating people... the punters don't like it Sammy.'

'Well, you should tell your guys to stop doing it then, shouldn't you?'

'This Hollywood clown you got downstairs, he's brought what, ten, fifteen people in? Doubled your takings, Sammy!' His jowls shook as he gave a hoarse chuckle. 'But he ain't gonna be around forever, you know. Nope, I think my associates have made a very good offer in the circumstances and you'd be a mug not to take it.'

'OK, so I'm a mug. But I'm still a mug with something you ain't got.' Fabrizi took a slim cigar out of his top pocket and lit it, blowing smoke in Santana's glistening face. 'So if there's nothing else...'

Santana straightened up, visibly stifling the urge to cough.

'Have it your way then Sammy. Me, I'd rather see you retire to the coast with your spine in one piece...'

'Is that a threat?'

'Now you know me, Sammy. I don't make threats. But with Mr Spitz in town, decisions may have to be taken. Six months time, they'll running this place themselves, or running it into the ground and you along with it. We just have to do whatever it takes. Come on, boys.'

Santana turned on his heel and headed out the door, followed by the five men who'd been lounging round Fabrizi's office with an array of weaponry dangling from their hands.

Fabrizi closed the door after them, turned and leant back heavily against it. He took a long drag on his cigar, wiped his brow, and looked at the cold sweat on the back of his hand. He couldn't keep this up forever. Maybe it was time to call it quits. He just didn't want Santana to think he'd won.

Just as unconcerned as when they'd arrived, the Doctor watched the armed visitors leaving, giving a cheery wave to the short fat one who stared at him on his way down the stairs.

'Thirty-six, red, even.'

'Ah well, I know they say you can't win them all, but at least one would be nice.'

The Doctor glanced down at K9's display. A frown knotted his brow. Instead of the stream of digits he was expecting, there was nothing.

Then one single digit flashed up on K9's side panel - '9'.

Glancing to each side, the Doctor gave his creation a kindly tap with the toe of his boot. '9' resolutely flashed again.

'Come on K9, you could at least show your reverse temporal probability projections to two decimal places...'

The dealer was about to drop the metal bearing into the spinning wheel. The '9' stayed put. As far as the Doctor could tell, it didn't represent anything close to the probability matrices that should be showing up. Something was wrong - it could just be a problem with the display, or it could be more deep-rooted. He couldn't be sure without examining his new companion more closely, but here wasn't the place. The Doctor considered again - the number hadn't come up in the recent past, but...

He had about twenty dollars left in chips - the sum total of his remaining US currency. He might as well call it a day. With a shrug, he pushed his last few chips onto the number 9 on the baize table.

'No more bets, gentlemen.'

The Doctor picked up K9's lead and turned from the table.

'Time to go, K9. I think I need to take another look at your command interface.'

The metal dog obligingly whirred and spun to follow his master, eliciting cries of delight from a hostess at the craps table.

'He is so cute. Tommy, I *want* one.'

As he took his second stride away from the table, something nagged at the back of the Doctor's mind and he stopped. He waited for the clatter of the ball to cease.

'Nine, red, odd.'

He turned back. Looked at the wheel. Looked at K9. His side panel now said 11.

'Well, well, well... what are you up to, little chap?'

The Doctor flashed a grin at the dealer as a huge pile of chips was added to his original stake on the baize table.

'Beginner's luck?' he offered.

The dealer smiled: the guy had probably lost that much over the past two days.

The Doctor bit his bottom lip thoughtfully... and pushed the whole stack onto number 11.

So, the guy had finally got lucky. Artie Holden had been praying for a piece of luck like that for weeks and couldn't stop himself staring daggers at the Doctor's back.

How come it always found its way back to the people who needed it least? The Hollywood Limey could afford to lose big, but he just picked up a score. If Artie had known anything about gravity, he might have put it down to the ability of a large amount of money to attract yet more towards it. But he didn't. He just fumed and looked down the last line of his scribbled notes.

26, 5, 7, 15, 00, 5, 36, 9.

There was no point even carrying on. Artie screwed up the paper and dropped it in an ashtray. He realised he was noting down the numbers out of habit, even though he had nothing to bet with in here. His pockets were stuffed full of similar sequences taken from the four wheels in the Desert Angel. He was sure that if he could just study them hard enough, the pattern would come out at him. He just needed one big win...

Artie owed, and he owed big. Worst of all, he owed Santana big. He needed a change of luck, and was out looking for pointers. He'd heard about the strange new guy, calling himself 'Doctor' and pulling a tin dog

around on a leash, who'd taken up residence at the Pelican's tables. In a way, he could see why Sammy Fabrizi was putting up with it. It was true: he had brought more trade in - the place was fuller than he'd seen it in months, though thirty people rather than the usual dozen or so was nothing to get real excited about.

Not like Benny Santana's Desert Angel one block down the Strip. Things could hardly be going better for that thug from New York. He'd muscled in on old Tony Grierson's patch. The old-timer had been one of the founding hoteliers of the Strip, but made the mistake of taking on a partner to expand the business, without realising that this 'partner' was being backed by certain interested parties from the Big Apple. Of course the Chicago mob had not been too happy about this, and by the end of '51, old man Grierson had had too much of being stuck in the crossfire, sold the rest of his hotel and headed off to the west coast. Santana had been moved in as manager: a tough guy with a reputation, he could hold onto the business so New York could establish a firm foothold in a Strip sewn up by Chicago.

Of course when Grierson moved on, Artie's gambling debts had been taken on by Santana, and he'd been only too happy to extend his credit further, seeing as Artie was being kind enough to pump it all back into his gaming tables. Sammy wouldn't lend him money, word had got out, and the only place he could get credit was at the Desert Angel.

In short, he was screwed.

Rumour had it the New York 'businessmen' were coming to inspect Santana's handiwork. It was no secret they wanted to expand, and the Pelican was next on the list.

Artie craned to watch as it seemed all the customers in the place surrounded the stranger's table. The Doctor had put all his winnings on another single.

There it was again - he was sure that the guy kept talking to his little metal dog...

There was a hush as the ball clattered round the wheel once again.

'Eleven, black, odd.'

It wasn't just the punters that were interested now. Two heavy-set gorillas in dinner suits were making their way to the Doctor's table.

It suddenly occurred to the Doctor that he hadn't really thought this through. K9 was now showing '25' and the dealer had looked nervously around the room when he'd made to place a stack of chips on the number.

The Time Lord could see the house thugs making their way toward him, and he abruptly changed his mind and removed the chips from the playing area, leaving them in a pile in front of him. He tried to reassure the uneasy dealer.

'The thing I find with beginner's luck is that you shouldn't really push it too far.'

This wasn't at all what he'd intended, the Doctor thought as he quickly scanned the room for the nearest available exit. He wouldn't make it. Attracting this sort of attention had not been part of the plan.

He dropped to his haunches and murmured into his companion's swivelling ear.

'This may be a good moment to make a discreet exit, K9. We can't really afford to have you taken to pieces before the human race has got as far as the microchip. The Time Lords may take a very dim view. When I give the word, I want you to go straight back to the TARDIS, don't get into any trouble, and check your calculations.'

He patted the metal dog's head and K9's tail wagged up and down twice.

The Doctor picked up the lead again and stood up. He essayed his most disarming smile at the burly fellows who now surrounded him.

'As I was just saying to your colleague here, it really is the most remarkable beginner's luck. You see, I've been losing since yesterday, so I'm afraid I might be due a run of it.'

'Mr Fabrizi would like to invite you up to his office, sir,' rumbled the heavy in front of him. The other was scooping the Doctor's considerable pile of chips into a cloth pouch.

'Really? That's most considerate of him. I'm afraid I am in rather a hurry though, I have to get this little chap back for filming, and I believe my train leaves in the next hour...'

'Mr Fabrizi insists on congratulating you.'

The second heavy held out his pouch of chips with one slab-like

hand and gripped the Doctor's arm firmly with the other, pushing up his palm to receive the dropped booty.

'Your winnings, sir.' He nodded at the hovering dealer. 'Carry on, Slim. Our friend don't need to win no more.'

'Look, really, I'm not that attached to the money...' the Doctor objected.

The grip on his arm tightened, and the Doctor could see the bulge of a shoulder holster in each of his assailants' jackets. He considered for a second.

'Well, if Mr Fabrizi insists... I'm sure I can spare him a few minutes.' He dropped the leash he'd been holding in his free hand.

'Go, K9!'

With a noisy whirr, the metal dog spun on his axis, causing even the two heavies to goggle in alarm. Before they could react further, he'd made a beeline for the door, startled customers and waitresses jumping out of his path. K9 shot past the legs of the doorman and out of the entrance.

The Doctor continued to grin at the bemused heavies.

'Well, one of us had to pack.'

As the babble of the gaming room gave way to a sudden hush, a voice came from the balcony above. 'That's OK guys, let it go. But bring our winner up. And, George, there's no need to manhandle him... is there, Doctor?'

A well-groomed man with a pencil moustache was leaning on the banister at the top of the stairs. He wore a cream suit with pale grey pinstripes, and was surveying the scene with a hint of wry amusement playing about his lips.

The Doctor felt his arms being released and nodded to his captor.

'Thank you, George. How civilised.'

He gathered up his scarf and headed for the stairs, flanked by the two heavies. Now, this looked like a reasonable man... he was sure he could be out of here and on his way in a matter of minutes. As he strolled to the stairs, he heard the roulette ball fall silent once again.

'Twenty-five, red, odd.'

The dealer breathed a sigh of relief.

All eyes were on the casino owner and the Doctor as they headed into the upstairs suites. No-one noticed as a suddenly animated Artie Holden slipped by the doorman and out onto the street.

K9 trundled past several bemused humans before he reached the alleyway between the Pelican and the Desert Angel, at the end of which the TARDIS had landed. He was extremely satisfied with the acceleration he had achieved to leave the gaming area, and put on another spurt of speed to head down the alley. He extended the antenna in his visor and sent the recognition signal to the sentient transport that would alert it to his approach and open the doors.

In the absence of the Doctor-master it would be most enlightening to be able to compare notes with another intelligence on the remarkable phenomenon he had observed. Of course, it would require more data to prove his theory with absolute certainty, but the evidence already gathered was enough to make him feel at least 76.8% certain...

K9 came to a halt in front of the TARDIS doors. Or, to be more accurate, he came to a halt in front of and 26.8cm below the TARDIS doors, having run into solid concrete. The end of the alleyway was a dead-end, enclosed by the back of another building in the street behind, and it here that that TARDIS had landed. The problem for K9 was that the ship was sitting on a concrete sill that ran the width of the alley, and was an insurmountable 26.8cm high.

The Doctor had lifted K9 out of the TARDIS when they arrived, but the action had not appeared of sufficient relevance to store for future reference. It had, after all, been K9's first exit from their transport, and so there had been no comparison possible. In fact there was no reason not to assume that this method of exit would be anything other than typical.

For pure scientific interest's sake, K9 scanned the surrounding area to ascertain if any other beings had observed his inconvenience. A single human had entered the alleyway and was now 6 metres distant.

Once again, for interest's sake and nothing more, K9 swiftly calculated that given the human's current rate of movement, it was unlikely to have seen him collide with the concrete obstruction.

He considered the Doctor's previous instructions on minimising vocal communication, and then his order to return to the TARDIS. K9 made a decision.

'Approaching human! This unit requires assistance.'

Artie Holden stopped in his tracks.

'How are you doing that? Is there is a little guy in there? I seen midgets in the circus before, but you gotta be *real* tiny to fit in there.'

K9 considered the human's questions.

'There is no organic component required in this unit.'

'Or... organic... what?'

K9 realised more explanation was required for the primitive. He scanned his database for mid-twentieth century technological attainment.

'This unit has no living components. A motor vehicle combined with an adding machine would be an appropriate analogy within your limited understanding.' K9's ear radar swivelled.

The features on the human's face continued to correspond with the pattern representing lack of comprehension. Perhaps an attempt at familiarity would speed assistance.

'This unit is designated K9.'

The human appeared to reach some sort of understanding.

'Adding machine... K9... you telling me that's your name?'

A subroutine operated K9 tail mechanism lever to indicate approval.

'Affirmative, human. Please provide assistance to reach the TARDIS.'

'K9... canine, I get it. Wow, you must be from one of those science fiction movies. I gotta say I prefer George Raft myself - something true to life.'

Artie had seen some odd things in his time in Vegas, but he'd always heard that weirder things went on in Hollywood. A talking adding machine on wheels... now that was pushing things a little, but he'd just seen the man this thing was with win twice on the wheel...

It looked like the little guy wanted to get up to the big blue box on the ledge. He looked at it for the first time... there was writing on top: 'POLICE BOX'. Uh-oh.

The door was open, a soft glowing light was coming from inside, and Artie was sure there was some sort of humming just on the edge of his hearing. He stepped forward, past 'K9', and reached for the door... It closed before he could reach it.

'So, you wanna get in there little guy? Are you undercover, working on the mob? Who are you putting the heat on?'

'Affirmative, I require assistance to reach the TARDIS. Affirmative, my instructions were to stay “undercover”. I have not yet been required to increase the temperature of any individual.'

Artie's mind was racing... police... Hollywood... strange blue boxes... adding machine... He was already in enough trouble with the hoods, and certainly didn't want to get on the wrong side of the cops as well... that is, if these guys were cops...

He focused on the one thing he was sure of and had at least seen with his own eyes. Shooting a furtive glance towards the other end of the alley, Artie dusted down a portion of the sill next to the blue box and took a seat.

He leant closer toward K9's upturned head.

'Listen, whatever you're doing here, I don't think you want your cover blown... but I *do* think you helped your buddy win on the wheel. I just got one question - can you do it again?'

K9 appeared to consider for a second.

'Affirmative, the Doctor would not have been successful in his wager without my assistance. With current data, there is an 85% probability that this unit could accurately predict the outcome of future events surrounding that particular device.'

It was Artie's turn to pause for thought.

'I like the sound of those odds, only I don't got no credit with the Pelican. What about another wheel in another joint?'

'Data already gathered suggests that a limited portion of local spacetime is under some probability field influence. Random seed forecasting should be within my capabilities given sufficient history. Hypothesis requires corroboration with the TARDIS.'

Artie's jaw hung in lack of comprehension.

'Nope. Didn't get any of that.'

K9's ears swivelled agitatedly.

'Simplified: if I have previous results, I can confirm my theory and predict the results of roulette spins in the local area.'

'Ahh. You need history? That's just what I thought, I've been doing the same as you little guy. I knew I was right, there *is* a pattern.' He pulled a grubby roll of paper from his pocket.

'Now, you just want to get up on this step and into that thing?'

'Affirmative, human.'

'In that case, little buddy, I think we can help each other out. And by the way, the name's Artie.'

Fabrizi's office was part of the largest hotel suite on the first floor. From what he knew of such things, the Doctor considered the decor to be rich but rather restrained by Vegas standards. As soon as he entered, Fabrizi seated himself behind a large mahogany desk, waving at a green leather armchair in the front of the desk for the Doctor to do likewise. One of his heavies headed for a well-stocked drinks cabinet in the corner of the room. As he sat, the Doctor glanced back at the man who remained by the door: he was reaching into his jacket to take out a bulky pistol. As he turned back to face Fabrizi, the Doctor felt the weight of the armed guard's glare on the back of his head.

'You know, people who point guns at me don't usually find I'm at my most co-operative.'

'Of course.' Fabrizi took the glass brought to him by George and waved to his other employee. 'Louie, there's no need for that. Not yet. Doctor, will you take a shot of Bourbon?'

'Why not?' The Doctor settled back in the chair and steepled his fingers in front of his chin. He really needed to get out and work out what K9 was up to with as little local disruption as possible.

'Now Mr Fabrizi, what can I do for you? As I said, I do have pressing engagements elsewhere.'

'You've been quite a lucky guy Doctor. It's not every day I have to give away twenty-five thousand dollars.'

'I have my moments,' the Doctor pushed out his bottom lip. 'But I've really got no need for the money. It was more for scientific interest...' He took the rattling crystal glass offered by George, placed it on the

table and leant forward conspiratorially. 'You see, my dog told me to do it.'

Fabrizi stared at him across the table through narrowed eyes. Suddenly he gave a short, sharp laugh. 'OK Doc, I'll level with you. Before this week, this place was dying on its ass. Still is. I let you and your little toy come in 'cause you created a buzz. People were coming back - but the commission is a little heavy.'

'As I said, I'm not interested in the money.'

'I don't know who you are - Hollywood producer, professional gambler, and it don't really matter to me. Louie there thinks I should shoot you and get my money back... but I had a better idea.'

Now they were getting to it. The Doctor leaned back again and made his best nonchalant face. 'And that was?'

'I give you your money back - or ten percent anyways - and send you back to the tables. Only not to my tables.'

'Ah.'

'I want you to go down the block to the Desert Angel and take that mug Santana for every dime you can.'

When the Doctor left Fabrizi's office five minutes later with a clip of crisp fifty-dollar bills in his pocket, the casino owner poured himself another drink. He looked at his guest's untouched glass on the table.

'Louie.'

'Yes, boss.'

'Follow our friend. And if he doesn't go straight into Santana's joint...' He took a long slug of whisky.

'Yes, boss?'

'Shoot him and get my money back.'

Louie paused at the door. 'Really, boss?'

Fabrizi gave another staccato laugh: 'What do *you* think?'

K9 extended his visor interface antenna and reconnected himself to the TARDIS via the console service panel the Doctor had removed earlier. Scattered around the floor were dice ranging from four- to twenty-four-sided, a collection of alien coins, and cards from at least five different packs. There were also various pieces of wiring and electronic

equipment from which the Doctor had fashioned something he called a 'predictable randomiser', which was now installed deep in the recess K9 was exploring. They had spent several days with the device generating a probability pocket attuned to varying degrees of predictability until the Doctor had changed his mind and decided that K9 needed some 'experience in the field'.

Its investigation complete, the telescopic probe retracted back into K9's visor. As he had suspected, his owner hadn't actually bothered to turn the device off when they left. The result was that the probability field had been leaking into the very quanta of the surrounding area

K9's suspicion had been aroused when he recognised the random seed pattern in the roulette spins over the past two days. It was precisely the same configuration which had allowed him to beat the Doctor on every hand of something he had called 'blackjack' for two solid hours. K9 recalled that it was immediately after this that the Doctor had decided isolated experimentation was much too rarefied, and that he had set the co-ordinates for their current location.

'Data-collection is a necessary part of all scientific analysis. It's a discipline you're going to have to learn,' the Doctor had said as he set K9 in front of a roulette wheel before disappearing off to a nearby 'blackjack' table.

The task set had been simple but uninspiring - record the wheel spins and reverse-extrapolate probability matrices, with a subroutine also set to look out for any patterns which might indicate bias in the wheel itself, or consistencies in the dealer's throw. Unfortunately, his instructions - in accordance with the 'undercover' part of his training - had been only to move when pulled by a piece of cord the Doctor had attached to his neck, and K9 had not been able to explore as freely as he might have hoped.

Today, however, in a change from the previous afternoon, the Doctor had remained with him by the roulette table. K9 had noticed that the wad of US bills the Doctor had discovered in one of his old jackets was now looking severely depleted from the previous day. It was there that the familiar logarithmic progression of the random seed pattern had started to emerge. He had tried to alert his master by displaying the next results in sequence, hoping that he too would spot the pattern. For

some reason, however, he had not.

K9 was beginning to suspect that his own positronic brainpower far surpassed most of the organic minds he had thus far encountered.

He could see the human 'Artie' on the scanner screen waiting outside. Certainly, from the limited understanding that this human had displayed, it would be even more difficult to explain to him how to calculate any winning sequences. However, K9 had made a bargain in exchange for access to the TARDIS. Perhaps if the sequence were something simpler to follow...

K9 buried his head in the innards of the TARDIS console one more.

The Doctor strolled into the foyer of the Desert Angel, humming to himself. He'd popped his head round the door of this place the previous day, but had decided it was a little too showy - not to mention crowded - for his taste. Furthermore, it looked like the sort of place that operated a strict 'No Dogs' door policy. He declined the doorman's offer to take his hat and coat - an offer made, to the doorman's credit, after only a moment's hesitation.

As he looked round the room, he watched the door to confirm his suspicion that he'd been followed. Sure enough, here came that chap - Louie, wasn't it? - with the unhealthy predilection for shooting people. Strange, because that Fabrizi fellow had seemed rather charming. The Doctor reassured himself that he really was doing his utmost just to leave, but it didn't seem as though these people would let him until he'd done something with their money.

If he were to do what Fabrizi had asked, he really needed K9's uncanny ability on the roulette wheel - but he'd sent the little chap back to the TARDIS. Oh, for an electronic dog whistle... As it was, he had to rely on his own skills, and he was at least sure that he was more than capable of counting cards. Well, he had been relatively sure about that the previous morning, but look where that had got him... Then again, it could be that the safest thing he could do was lose all the money as quickly as possible - at least he should then be able to leave without further involvement. There wasn't that much to choose from between the two strategies - win, or lose.

'Let's just see how things go before I commit myself,' the Doctor

murmured to himself.

Scanning the blackjack tables along one wall of the smoky room, he spotted a game attended by the fat man he'd seen earlier in the Pelican.

'Aha, a familiar face.'

The Doctor took hold of one of the empty chairs from a nearby table and carried it over. The man he recognised was dealing, flanked by two imposing looking fellows: one with a long scar running the length of his right cheek, and the other rather older, with a silver-topped cane across his lap and a fat cigar protruding from under his grey moustache. Two of the armed guards he'd seen in the Pelican were also seated. They turned their frowns from their cards to the Doctor.

'Do you mind if I join you?'

'This is a private table, buddy -' the large man started to get up from his chair, but the older man put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

'Wait, Benny. This the guy from the Pelican?'

'I'm the Doctor. How do you do?'

Benny Santana looked with disdain at the proffered hand across the table; and was even more perturbed to see his cigar-smoking colleague take it and shake it.

'Doctor? I thought you said he was in showbusiness?'

Santana shrugged.

'Well, Doctor, I've heard a lot about you. Vincenzo Spitz is the name. Myself and my colleague are down from New York to take a look at how our investments are doing.'

Scarface gave a nod, while Santana shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

'We're looking to expand, maybe do a little more on the entertainment side of things. It'd sure be useful to have a contact in LA. I hear you got an interesting little toy with you.'

'Boxed and stowed away,' replied the Doctor, mentally crossing his fingers. 'I'm afraid that we're quite in demand at the moment. We were hoping to leave town this evening, but I seem to have got a little distracted.'

'Ah yes,' Spitz nodded. 'I heard you got lucky at the Pelican... well; let's see if we can relieve you of some of that burden. Benny, deal the

Doctor in.'

Leaning out over the balcony once again, Fabrizi surveyed the sorry sight that was his business. Since Santana's visit and the Doctor's departure, people just seemed to lose what interest they had and drift out the door.

George came up the stairs to join him. Three sad-looking guys were standing round the craps table, making half-hearted attempts to throw the dice. He'd give even money that they didn't have more than a hundred dollars between them.

Standing by the empty card tables, Louie caught his eye and shrugged his shoulders in despair.

'Not much of a living, eh George?'

'You'll be OK, Sammy. It's just a lean patch. Everyone gets them.'

'I don't know... What do you say we call it a night?'

'You're the boss.'

'So you say, George, so you say. I think I'll pay a visit to the Angel. See what our friends from the east coast have to say.'

George nodded slowly then headed back down the stairs.

Fabrizi sighed and returned his gaze to the craps table. The customers were gone and the dice had stopped rolling.

'You sure about this, little guy?' Artie was standing by the strange blue box, with K9's front half poking out through its doors. The robot's head moved agitatedly up and down.

'The probability field is set to switch to my own parameters in two minutes and thirty seconds. Chance of success one hundred percent.'

Artie looked at his watch and the ticking second hand - he was still having second thoughts. He was putting his future in the hands, or paws, of a metal dog that lived in a closet, and hung around with a guy dressed like an explosion in a junk store. Still, he'd done stupider things in his time.

'OK, that's good enough for me, little buddy.'

K9's head turned up, and Artie could see a deep red glow behind the visor of his eyes. He shook his head in wonder. 'You sure there's no little guy in there?'

'Good luck, Artie Holden.' Then K9's head was gone back into the box, and the door swung closed.

Artie turned and trotted down the alley, running through what his mechanical friend had told him. It all seemed ridiculously simple...

He turned left into the Strip and paused in front of the Desert Angel. Looking back across the street, he could see the lights were out in the Pelican. George was seeing the last of the customers out and locking up the front doors. Poor old Sammy. Maybe some guys just weren't cut out to make it in Vegas. He knew now from bitter experience that Artie Holden sure wasn't going to - he'd be on the first train out as soon as he was clear of his debts.

As the sun sank in the Nevada sky, the lights of the hotels and casinos on the Strip flickered on through the windows; signs and frontages buzzed and lit up on a few of the more impressive buildings. You could tell who had mob connections just from the size of their letters. No, this place was getting too damn dangerous for the likes of him. He checked his watch again, took a deep breath and pushed open the glass doors of the Angel, counting steadily under his breath.

'Sixty-nine Mississippi, sixty-eight Mississippi...'

Once inside, Artie moved quickly from table to table. There were four wheels in Santana's place, and if his little friend came up trumps, he'd probably be able to win twice, three times tops, on each one. OK, his debts all-told came to just under ninety-five thousand. Doing the math quickly in his head had told him he only needed a score on each to begin with. That was good - he had about a hundred in Desert Angel chips in his pockets. He'd seen the last numbers the wheels had shown on each of the tables, and flitted between them laying his bets. With knowing nods and headshakes from the various dealers who knew him by sight, they took his four singles. He knew what they thought of him - the desperate, crazy guy who'd sat there for weeks noting down numbers and looking for patterns. Well, they'd see soon enough, that all he needed now was the simplest pattern of all. Three of the wheels were spinning and Artie counted down as he laid his fourth twenty-dollar chip:

'Three Mississippi... two Mississippi... one...'

The fourth ball was dropped and began its clattering course round

the wheel.

Hovering over the card table, Benny Santana was sweating even more than usual.

'What's the vernacular here... Ah yes... Hit me!'

Santana would dearly have loved to take the Doctor at his word, but instead flicked another card toward his grinning opponent.

An ace fell alongside the five and six in front of the Doctor. A run of high cards had just busted everyone else at the table, despite their promising starts. The Doctor had beaten him on the last two hands and Santana could see that Spitz was impressed. The old guy was a sucker for a bit of showbiz. Santana looked down at his own cards in front of him. A nine and a ten.

A cheer went up from across the room.

It didn't sound like it was the house's night.

'What do you think Mr Spitz, should I go for broke?' The Doctor quizzed the old man across the table.

'Well, you can't really lose. Benny here seems to be making that *his* speciality.'

Santana was annoyed to see his own men join in the laughter, and flinched as another cheer came from the other tables.

The Doctor gave a toothy grin across at him.

'Hit me again.'

A two.

'Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.'

'Enjoying yourself, Doc?'

The voice came from behind the Doctor. He turned to see Sammy Fabrizi standing behind him.

'Oh absolutely. I never knew Las Vegas was such a generous town.'

Great, thought Santana as the Pelican's owner joined in the laughter. This was getting better by the second.

'Hey Sammy,' Spitz acknowledged the new arrival. 'You got any tips for my boy? Seems he's forgotten how to deal!'

Another round of laughter.

Another cheer from the tables across the room. Santana craned to see what was happening. The roulette wheels were crowded, but his

staff were looking worried. And - hey, wasn't that Artie Holden jumping up and down?

'Benny, give the man a card.' At yet more commotion from across the way, Spitz motioned with his cigar to his scarfaced companion.

'Go check it out. See how much of our money Benny here is giving away.'

This time the only chuckle came from Fabrizi. Scarface stood headed over to the wheels.

Santana dealt another card.

A three. Of hearts. He looked again. Not only had he just dealt the Doctor three cards in sequence, *they were all the same suit*. He looked down at his own cards again, the nine and ten. *Of clubs*. He looked over at the cards that had bust the others. Jack, queen, king of clubs. Finally, he looked again at the cards he'd dealt the Doctor: ace, two, three of hearts. Santana gulped and felt a line of sweat trickle down his nose.

The Doctor's cards totalled seventeen. Five-card trick. He'd already won.

Santana looked pleadingly at his opponent. The Doctor's expression had changed to one of puzzlement, then concentration, his brow furrowed as his wide eyes rose from his cards to fix on Santana.

'Now, I'm sure you're just as curious as I am to see what comes next.' The Doctor's voice was low and menacing as he eyed Spitz and Santana in turn.

Santana picked up the deck and made to take off the top card... then stopped. Scarface had come back with a face like thunder. He leant over and spoke into Spitz's ear.

The older man listened for a few seconds, then waved his cigar at Santana's men seated at the table.

'You two, go shut down the tables. Tell everyone it's time to go home.' Then Spitz turned back to Santana. The big man seemed to be melting into the expensive silk fabric of his tailored shirt.

'What in hell's going on here Benny? If you're fixing the games, at least have the brains to fix them to win. My associate tells me your wheels are running in sequence. Some little runt just picked up a

hundred thou, and now everyone's getting a piece of the action. And you don't wanna know what's going on at the craps tables.'

'In... in sequence?' Santana felt like the whole room was going dark, apart from the little spot in front of him holding the three faces of Spitz, Fabrizi and the Doctor.

'You know, one, two, three, four, et cetera.' Spitz stubbed out his cigar and pulled himself to his feet. 'Kinda like our little card game here.'

He stepped behind the table with his cane in his hand till his face was inches away from the big man's ear.

'I don't know what your beef is, Benny. But this sure as hell ain't no way to run a casino. I had my doubts about you when the family sent you out here. Nothing but a two-bit thug without the brains to tie his own boots, that's what I thought. And now I'm proved right.'

Spitz slammed his cane on the table in front of him, scattering cards and chips.

Santana jumped, but still held the deck in his hand.

'Oh I don't know about that,' the Doctor was also standing now and peering over the table at Santana's feet. 'He seems to have done quite a good job of them today.' He considered for a second. 'Or did you get somebody to do it for you?'

Before the panicking Santana could formulate a response, the Doctor moved back behind his chair and pushed it under the table.

'I can see you gentleman have things to discuss, and as I've been telling everyone today, I really do have a pressing need to be elsewhere. And if this card is, as I'm sure we all suspect -' he leant forward and deftly swiped the top card from the deck held by the trembling Santana, and pocketed it - 'the four of hearts, then I'm afraid that I've got my own house to set in order.'

Spitz hardly gave the Doctor another glance, so intent was he on venting his anger on his minion.

'Go ahead, Doctor. I'd thank you not to spread the word about our... bad luck round Hollywood.'

'I don't think you'll have any worries on that account. Though I can't say it's been pleasant, Mr Spitz, Mr Santana.' The Doctor turned to walk away as the boss and his enforcer rounded on the casino

manager.

He noticed Fabrizi at his shoulder. The Time Lord leant to one side and whispered 'I think now might be an opportune moment to take your leave.'

'Good idea, Doc. But I think I'll stick around. You know what the mobsters say: “We only kill each other.”'

'Doesn't that depend on how sure you are that you're not one of them? I'd really rather that nobody killed anyone. But then, you humans do seem to keep trying to, even over the least consequential things.'

He pulled a wad of bills out of his inside pocket with one hand, while running the other through his curly mop of hair.

'And if there's one thing I've learned in my considerable experience, it's that sometimes you just have admit to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I for one was never here.'

He handed the bundle to a baffled Fabrizi, and tapped the side of his nose with a long forefinger.

'You're welcome to the winnings on the table too, as long as you put them towards something worthwhile. Like a train ticket.'

'I'll think about it Doc. But I've a feeling that there might be something else on the table, like an offer from Mr Spitz... I just have to work out how far I'm prepared to go.'

'Well, it's your decision. Best of luck, eh.'

'Thanks. Oh, and Doc...'

'Yes.'

'I wouldn't have shot you, you know.'

The Doctor flashed another of his toothy grins.

'Didn't think you would for a minute! When you've been threatened by professionals as often as I have, it's quite easy to spot an amateur. Buy a beach house Mr Fabrizi, you'd be much more at home.'

And with a wave he was gone.

As the crowds streamed out of the Desert Angel on that strange September night, Artie Holden was at their tail. His little buddy K9 had hit the nail on the head - just finish the countdown and, pick the next consecutive numbers, he'd told him. He'd never seen anything like it before, but it had worked like a dream. In fact most of the other

punters had picked up on it after the third spin, and they'd still be there now if they hadn't shut the place down.

For a moment there he'd thought the game was up, when the infamous Mr Spitz's enforcer had cornered him with his winnings. There'd been talk of 'bad publicity' and 'reputations' before Mr Spitz himself had sent him on his way with a warning to keep quiet and get out of town. That was a requirement Artie Holden was more than happy to fulfil. He felt the reassuring folds of the thousand dollar clip in his inside pocket and set off towards the railroad station.

He might just go and get a piece of the Hollywood action himself. Maybe go see some science fiction movies - he couldn't help feeling they weren't so far-fetched after all. He looked at his watch. If he was lucky, he'd just be in time for the last train west.

If he was lucky... Artie Holden started to laugh.

The Doctor strode purposefully down the alley between the Desert Angel and the Pelican and opened the TARDIS door. He really should have known better than to let him out on his own, he scolded himself. Perhaps he'd followed the original's personality matrices a little too closely. K9 Mark I had been a little... he hesitated to use the word about a machine... dare he say... 'arrogant'?

He'd hoped that adding a dash of his own brain patterns to the mix might have tempered any such tendencies, but no. To manipulate quantum probability fields in an environment such as this was not only dangerous, it was downright conceited!

Though he had to admit, it did take remarkable skill...

'K9!' he called angrily, entering the console room. He stopped abruptly and looked around.

Hadn't there been rather a mess when they'd left this morning? He could have sworn that the console service panel had been open. The floor was clear of debris and everything seemed much tidier than he remembered.

Maybe he *had* cleared everything away? His memory was getting such that he could recall events from more than a century ago with utmost clarity, but anything within the last twenty years was something of a blur.

Perhaps he'd been wrong. If he'd already stowed away the equipment from his earlier experiment, then K9 couldn't possibly have interfered with the randomised probability generator.

A squat metal shape glided in from the TARDIS corridor, its tail wagging.

'Master?'

The Doctor raised a warning index finger and fished in his pocket for the playing card from the Desert Angel. He looked at it, pushed out his bottom lip and held up the card for K9 to see.

The four of hearts.

The TARDIS console service panel slipped loose and clattered to the floor.

K9's tail drooped and his head bowed in what a subroutine told him would be an appropriate expression of contrition.

'Bad dog, K9! Bad dog!'

Sammy Fabrizi stood in the moonlit Strip in front of the Desert Angel. He looked across at the Pelican's locked doors. Just by staying closed, he'd managed to make a whole lot more money than his rival. In fact, it would be several more weeks, with a bankroll of mob money, before the Desert Angel would get back into the black.

And now he had the chance to run both places.

Or, he could sell the Pelican - and not just for peanuts.

Vinnie Spitz was one of the old school: he respected hard work, but he also respected an individual's right to choose out if they wanted out. Though having said that, it didn't look like Benny Santana would get much of a choice.

Lady Luck certainly seemed to be smiling on Sammy Fabrizi tonight. Maybe he'd leave it up to her. He felt in his pocket pulled and out a quarter. Heads, I stay; tails, I sell up and hit beach.

With a last look up at the desert night sky, he flipped the into the air.

Heads.

OK.

How about best out of three?

The Science of Magic, and Vice Versa (aka Attack of the Gluons)

Arnold T. Blumberg

'Is there really magic, Miss Hawthorne?' The little girl asked the question with such expectation and wonder that it was hard not to be captivated by her enthusiasm.

'Of course,' Olive Hawthorne replied with conviction. 'There's always a little magic if you know where to look.' She wasn't placating the child, either. Miss Hawthorne truly believed, and she looked forward to spending afternoons with the Gillespie child, one of the few people in town that still spoke to her. Olive cherished her friendship with Laura and the time they spent together.

'Let me show you something,' Miss Hawthorne said mysteriously, bringing the girl over to the rickety wooden table standing just outside her door. Hawthorne lived in a small cottage on the outskirts of the village, and the front room doubled as her curio shop, stocked with all manner of herbs and mystical paraphernalia. There hadn't been much traffic recently, however, and even the few who used to drop in for the odd fortune or spiritual remedy were staying away these days. Only Laura still came every week to talk about magic or a million other things. Miss Hawthorne would make them tea or demonstrate a simple invocation or two. It was the bright spot in her life.

'See this line?' Miss Hawthorne instructed as they sat facing each other at the table. A small clay dish beside them sent up a wafting fragrance, incense smouldering as Olive traced the faint lines on the girl's tiny hand. She smiled as Laura's eyes widened in rapt attention.

'It tells me that you are going to live a very long time, and have a wonderful life.'

'You can see that in my hand?' Laura looked, but her skin yielded no secrets.

'Indeed I can,' Miss Hawthorne assured her. 'Magic isn't always

about potions or herbs. It's in the air, and in us as well. You simply have to find it within yourself.'

'How do I do that?'

Olive brushed the girl's fingertips with her own and stared with mock seriousness into her eyes. 'It's like drawing water from a well, really. You just reach down inside yourself and draw up all of the energy you find. If you concentrate and learn how to use that energy, anything is possible. Magic is very real, Laura. It's what the universe is made of.'

'I think that's enough, Miss Hawthorne.'

Olive looked up, startled, and saw Laura's mother behind the girl. She looked rather perturbed.

'Mum, Miss Hawthorne was only telling me...'

'I know what Miss Hawthorne was telling you, Laura, now run along.' The girl reluctantly obeyed, waving good-bye to Miss Hawthorne before running back up the path that led from Miss Hawthorne's cottage to the village proper. Laura's mother eyed Miss Hawthorne as Olive moved to greet her.

'Charlotte, I was only...'

'Miss Hawthorne,' she began, 'I expect excuses from a little girl but not a grown woman. I don't appreciate you filling my daughter's head with a lot of rubbish!'

'Mrs. Gillespie, we were just talking.'

'Well, you can just stop talking to Laura, thank you very much. This village has lost its appetite for your wares and your opinions, and that's all there is to it.'

Underneath Mrs. Gillespie's agitation, Olive could see that there was genuine fear behind her eyes. Miss Hawthorne was not particularly liked by the town's inhabitants ever since 'the incident' that destroyed the local church and brought the horned beast himself to their very doorsteps. The heat barrier was long gone, as were the soldiers and that malignant Mr. Magister, but the damage was done. No one wanted to remember the day all Hell broke loose in Devil's End, and since she was so much a part of that day, Olive Hawthorne had been relegated to conversations in whispered tones and sidelong glances on street corners. She was little more than an outcast.

'Very well, Charlotte, if that's the way you feel,' Olive replied in

measured tones, avoiding Gillespie's gaze and gazing at her herb garden for a source of calming energy. Her eyelids fluttered rapidly as she tried to regain her composure, resisting the urge to engage in a heated debate with the other woman. Such an argument wouldn't do Laura any good.

Mrs. Gillespie nodded curtly and left without another word. With a heavy sigh, Miss Hawthorne went inside and prepared to cast the runes as usual, hoping to distract herself from the unpleasant confrontation. It seemed that her lifelong devotion to magic had yielded no peace of mind, not if the last few months were any indication. As her life unravelled, she found herself wondering if indeed her belief would be enough.

Sitting at a table in her tiny but warmly decorated study, she methodically upended a velvet bag and proceeded to arrange the etched stones. Silently uttering a blessing to the spirits, she turned the runestones over one at a time. As she read the ancient writing, she gasped and recoiled in fear. Rushing to her crystal ball, nestled securely in its receptacle in one corner of the study, she brushed the surface with her fingertips, peering into its milky depths. From out of the dull haze, images arose that froze her in place. Her eyes widened in amazement, and she gasped as she beheld a tall, familiar man with a shock of white hair battling creatures from another realm. They were high on a hill in the countryside, tearing the fabric of the world asunder, destroying everything they touched, and he was helpless to stop them though he fought to his last ounce of strength. As the creatures, some sort of powerful elementals from beyond, spread out and ravaged the Earth, the glass turned red then black, forcing Miss Hawthorne back in fright. As she collected her wits, mind racing and hands shivering, she blinked to clear her vision and saw the crystal had returned to normal.

Miss Hawthorne withdrew from the room and hurried to gather her things and leave. He simply must be told about this at once, she thought urgently. The elementals are coming to consume the world!

His face contorted in a grimace of intense concentration, one eye augmented by a small magnifying glass, the tall slender gentleman with the ruffled shirt stood motionless in the centre of a well-stocked

laboratory... well, nearly motionless. In one hand he held a tangle of wires and circuits while in the other he wielded an even stranger tubular device topped by a ringed cone, and with a series of deceptively simple movements he darted the ringed end in and out of the malformed circuitry. An unidentifiable melody escaped the Doctor's lips as he hummed contentedly to himself.

Unlike the rest of the lab, which was filled with all manner of equipment from chemical analysis apparatus to banks of electronic controls along one wall, the corner nearest the entrance lacked any obvious technological adornment. Occupying that space with surreal quiet was a tall blue police box, and one that was particularly battered and scarred at that. Although visitors to the lab would be surprised to find this incongruity amongst the other items in the room, they would be even more perplexed by the subtle but unmistakable aura of power that emanated from the box, a pulse that was felt rather than heard, much like a heartbeat. But surely a police box couldn't be alive! Of course, if they asked its owner, he might indignantly reply, 'Well, why not?'

One person who had given up on questions like that was the Doctor's assistant, Jo Grant, who appeared at the door to the lab carrying a sheaf of papers and shaking her head as she observed the look of total absorption on the Doctor's face.

'I really just don't know,' Jo finally said. The Doctor never looked away from his work, but uttered a noncommittal 'Hmm?'

'How you can spend hours just standing there with all your gadgets when it's such a beautiful day outside!' Jo approached the Doctor and tried to peek under his downturned face. 'You'll suffocate in here if you don't get some fresh air once in a while, you know,' she whispered conspiratorially.

The Doctor finally removed his eyepiece and grinned. 'Not a bit of it, Jo. No, I'm just nearing a breakthrough that might get me off this planet for a change!' The Doctor hefted the tangle of circuitry while smiling smugly to himself, tucked his sonic screwdriver in an inside jacket pocket and headed for the police box. Jo followed at a discreet distance, a bit dejected that the Doctor might still wish to leave after all the adventures they'd had together.

At this point in his life, the Doctor had settled comfortably into his

third incarnation, even despite his enforced exile on the planet Earth. He was quite adamant about his desire to escape this planet and return to roaming time and space, but he had somehow grown attached to this peculiar family, the UNIT lot and Jo in particular. He had taken the young girl under his wing and they had forged a strong friendship. Together with the Brigadier and his trigger-happy goons, the Doctor had almost enjoyed himself these last few months, fending off the frequent alien invasions of Earth that seemed concentrated entirely in the England of the mid-1970s. The Doctor had formulated a few theories about the parabolic intersections of causal nexi, but ultimately he gave up and just accepted the fact that everyone seemed determined to land on British soil in this timezone. Perhaps Earth was just irresistibly charming; he wouldn't argue with that.

'I suppose you don't want to hear about the Master then?' Jo called, poking her head just inside the open door of the TARDIS. The Doctor's voice answered with a distinct echo.

'Settling into his new home, is he?'

'Well, he hasn't caused any trouble yet!'

'Oh, he will, don't you worry,' the Doctor said nonchalantly.

'Who's worried,' Jo murmured to herself. 'The Brigadier thought you'd want to read Colonel Trenchard's report!' She rustled the papers, but the Doctor did not emerge. Jo sighed and set the report near the Doctor's pile of electronic equipment. She was about to leave but stole one last peek inside the police box.

'Do you really believe you'll be able to fix the TARDIS after all this time, Doctor?'

'Of course,' the Doctor replied with conviction. 'There's always a reason if you know where to look. Science will provide the answer, Jo!'

Jo smiled and left the Doctor to his tinkering. She too had grown accustomed to their friendship. With a cloud of bright white hair surrounding his hawklike features, the Doctor was like a shining bulb just waiting to illuminate the darkness. Challenges to his intellect frequently came in the form of requests for help by the Brigadier, a man Jo knew the Doctor might call friend if only their sensibilities were not so wildly opposed. Where the Brigadier would rush in with guns blazing, the Doctor would thoughtfully review his options, contemplate

communication and reason, and solve a problem by intellect and not force. The Doctor was a highly moral man, a man of peace, of science.

She did realise, however, that the Doctor was not happy on Earth, and desperately wished to restore his TARDIS to working order. For a man of such insatiable curiosity, the Doctor had clearly fallen into a routine. He was Earthbound in spirit as well as body these days, and had grown almost... well, stuffy and predictable, as he put it. While Jo knew the Doctor couldn't stomach that, she did secretly harbour the hope that he might linger on Earth a while longer.

A few moments after Jo's departure, the Doctor stepped from the TARDIS, muttering something about the phase variance, and examined his new circuit under a magnifying glass mounted above his worktable. He withdrew his sonic screwdriver once more to effect a few adjustments. Just one more connection and...

'Doctor, are you going to keep me waiting all day?' Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart burst into the room, agitated and tapping his swagger stick into his open palm. The Doctor started, accidentally fusing several key components in one bright flash of red. The Doctor slowly looked up, turning to fix the Brigadier with a withering gaze. Lethbridge-Stewart merely looked bemused.

'Do you realise how many hours of work you've just cost me, Brigadier?' The Doctor slammed the tangle of circuits on the worktable. Once a promising bypass system for the dematerialisation circuit, it was now junk.

'Tell me on the way to BINAR, Doctor, come along.' The Brigadier left the room, and the Doctor looked one last time at his work before muttering something unintelligible and heading for the door, sweeping his cloak from the stand as he left. Minutes later, he was sulking beside the Brigadier in his staff car as they raced down a nondescript road in the countryside near UNIT HQ. Behind them, Sergeant Benton and a fully armed detachment were bringing up the rear in a lorry.

'And just where are we going today, Brigadier? Is there some sensitive region of the country you have yet to blow up?' The Doctor quipped, still seething.

'Nothing of the sort, Doctor,' Lethbridge-Stewart calmly replied. 'I told you yesterday, but you never do listen to briefings. BINAR, the

British Institute of Nuclear Advanced Research, is where those scientific types have set up the new atomic particle something or other. All very hush-hush, but they've been having some rather unsettling personnel disturbances around the complex. It's a job for UNIT.'

'Oh no! Not another nuclear research facility! This country is simply infested with them. In any case, I'm too busy to play nursemaid to a bunch of amateur physicists.' The Doctor crossed his arms and stared out the window. At times, the Doctor seemed to relish behaving like a spoiled brat. The Brigadier often marvelled at the paradox; an immense intellect with the emotional stability of a child.

'Sorry, Doctor, but your help is absolutely essential. All that science jargon is a bit beyond me, and as soon as Dr. Corrigan started talking about breaking down atoms and searching for the... glue-thing or whatever he called it, I knew...'

'Brigadier, say that again!' The Doctor had perked up, staring at the Brigadier intently.

'What, breaking down atoms?'

'NO, the rest of it! Come on, man!'

'Corrigan mentioned something about a... glue-on?' The Brigadier stole a glance at the Doctor as he drove, noting the Time Lord's sudden pained expression of concentration. 'What is it, Doctor?'

The Doctor paused for a moment, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

'Nothing, I hope. But if I'm right,' he added as he looked up at the Brigadier, 'we could all be in considerable danger!'

The Brigadier parked the car near a small office building just beyond an impressive wire gate with a guard tower and sign warding off passers-by. Benton parked alongside, instructing the men to deploy just outside the entrance of the building. Further up the hill was a much larger concrete structure, unmarked and unremarkable looking except for an array of unusual fixtures on the roof. A small pebble lane led down from the larger building to the smaller one. As the Doctor and the Brigadier stepped out, a sandy-haired gentleman in a white lab coat and round glasses greeted them enthusiastically. His hair and clothes were a bit rumpled, as if he had been sleeping in them frequently. His face beamed with excitement.

'Welcome to BINAR, Brigadier. I take it this is the scientific advisor you mentioned?'

The Brigadier nodded. 'Dr. Peter Corrigan, this is the Doctor.' The Doctor graciously took Corrigan's hand.

'It is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Doctor... erm...'

'Smith,' the Doctor replied, smiling. 'Doctor John Smith.'

Corrigan hesitated, glancing at the Brigadier and the Doctor, then smiled as if let in on a private joke. 'Of course, Dr. "Smith", a pleasure. If you'll both follow me inside?' The Brigadier motioned to Benton to wait outside, and Corrigan led the way into the office.

Corrigan took them down a series of very narrow corridors, the plain wooden doors along the walls festooned with newspaper clippings, handwritten notes, personal pictures and other odds and ends. The Doctor noted that some of the offices were occupied with similarly dressed men and women tinkering away at worktables or typing at computer terminals. It had the air of a college departmental office and the musty smell of a long-shut basement.

At the end of one hallway a door identical to the others stood ajar. Corrigan held up his hand and ushered his guests into a cramped office that barely held them all, much less the stacks of books and magazines covering the scuffed desk, shelving and floor of the tiny room. In the middle of this chaotic jumble was a small terminal near a picture window that looked toward the hill and the installation perched atop it. Corrigan hastily swept up some piles of papers and motioned for the two to take a seat.

'I apologise for the lack of order around here,' Corrigan grinned sheepishly, 'but we're rather busy and not the sort to stop and tidy up, you understand.'

'Quite all right, Dr. Corrigan,' Lethbridge-Stewart replied diplomatically, taking a seat and maintaining his rigid posture as he placed his swagger stick across his lap. The Doctor quietly slid into the other chair, sinking in and clasping his hands loosely together as his eyes wandered around the room.

'Suppose you tell me just what you're up to around here, eh Dr. Corrigan?'

'Of course, Doctor.' Corrigan took a seat behind the desk and

continued to move things as he spoke. 'We're about to conduct one of the greatest experiments in the history of physics, indeed of Mankind! For the last few years, a number of us, both here and at CERN near Geneva, have theorised that there exists in the submicroscopic a state of energy, a particle field if you will, that serves to hold all matter together. The entire universe is the result of this energy exerting a constant force on other particles, and without it, all matter would fly apart. So far no one has been able to definitively prove the existence of this 'cosmic glue,' but we believe that with our new accelerator we will break the final boundary and reach down into that layer!'

The Doctor smiled slightly, amused by Corrigan's primitive enthusiasm. 'That's an admirable endeavour, Dr. Corrigan, quite admirable. But have you considered the ramifications of such a discovery? The forces you might unleash?'

'Forces?' Corrigan chuckled softly, clearly puzzled. 'I'm not sure I understand. What forces are you talking about?'

'Think about it, man! You're proposing to tear apart the very fabric of the universe to take a look at the label! Haven't you considered what might happen if you can't mend it afterwards?'

'Doctor, I admire the witty metaphor, I do,' Corrigan laughed, 'but the universe isn't an old sweater, you know! This will be a carefully controlled experiment, and all it will amount to is a few seconds of breaking down the particles and gathering readings on the resulting energy. This will hardly affect the universe.' Corrigan smiled again, and the Brigadier remained stoic, eyeing the Doctor as the Time Lord's smile faded.

'On the contrary, Dr. Corrigan, on the contrary,' the Doctor pronounced. He looked at the Brigadier as if awaking from a trance and forced a terse smile. 'Before we get into all that, perhaps you would be good enough to explain the reason why you called us here in the first place?'

Corrigan shifted in his seat. 'But of course, that is why you're here, after all. I certainly hope you can help us with our, ah, difficulties. You see, about a month ago, shortly after installing the last of the high-grade equipment, we began experiencing a series of strange... phenomena, I suppose. Some of our staff complained of headaches,

even visions. One gentleman claimed that he had seen...' Corrigan started to chuckle nervously.

'Had seen what, Dr. Corrigan?' The Doctor leaned forward, prodding Corrigan to continue.

'Well, monsters, Doctor,' Corrigan laughed. 'Said he'd seen monsters coming to destroy us. But then, he was always a strange sort of chap, into all that New Age rubbish. After he tried to sabotage the installation of the accelerator control circuitry, he was dismissed.'

'But the problem persisted,' the Doctor added matter of factly.

'Yes, Doctor. Some of the others have complained of similar visions, and I'm worried that it might be a concerted effort to prevent us from achieving our goals. That's why I contacted UNIT, to provide security and a strong presence while we proceed. The experiment is scheduled to begin this afternoon.'

'May we see where the experiment is to be conducted?'

'Of course, Doctor. If you gentlemen will follow me...' Corrigan stood and ushered the two men to the door. His phone rang just as they were about to leave. 'One moment if you please, gentlemen. Yes, what is it?' Corrigan's smile faded quickly. What are you on about, Mr. Graf? A woman? No, I wasn't expecting any... the Doctor?' Corrigan appeared rather perplexed and looked at the Doctor.

'There's a woman at the gate saying she came here to find you, Doctor. Says her name is Hawthorne.'

'Olive Hawthorne?' the Doctor replied incredulously.

The Doctor, the Brigadier and Dr. Corrigan emerged from the front entrance just as a burly fellow in a guard's uniform walked up with a wisp of a woman following close behind, her hands clasped together anxiously and her eyes wandering everywhere at once. Her upturned face, aristocratic and pinched, turned to the Doctor and lit up. She accelerated her pace, and Corrigan silently waved for the guard to stand away.

'Doctor, I knew I'd find you here! This is where it's all going to happen, I'm sure of it!'

'Miss Hawthorne, how did you know where I was?'

'Why, the runes of course! That's why I'm here, Doctor. A terrible

disaster! The universe itself is crying out! The evil is here, I can feel it,' Olive uttered ominously, glancing around and then fixing Corrigan with a steely gaze. 'The evil has touched this man already. More will follow, the runes say so!'

'Miss Hawthorne, I can assure you...'

'Doctor, you know this... woman?'

'Yes, Dr. Corrigan, we met a short while ago. This is Miss Olive Hawthorne of Devil's End. Miss Hawthorne, Dr. Peter Corrigan of BINAR.' The two shook hands briefly as the

Brigadier looked on. As an afterthought, the Doctor added, 'You remember Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, of course.'

'Of course,' Hawthorne replied vaguely, 'but I must speak to you Doctor, this is imperative! Doom and disaster await us all!'

The Doctor grimaced and nervously rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at Corrigan. 'Yes, well, I don't suppose you might allow Miss Hawthorne to accompany us on our tour, would you Dr. Corrigan?'

'Well, this is most unexpected.' Corrigan looked at the Brigadier. 'This is a highly secured installation. You and the Brigadier have clearance, naturally, but...'

'I vouch for Miss Hawthorne's impeccable character,' the Doctor said, and Hawthorne blushed. 'You can trust her as assuredly as you can trust me.'

'Brigadier?'

The Doctor smiled soothingly at the Brigadier and nodded. 'On this occasion I am extending UNIT's guarantee of security and all due secrecy to Miss Hawthorne,' the Brigadier declared, only somewhat reluctantly.

'Very well then, return to your post Mr. Graf,' Corrigan said, waving to the guard, who headed back to the gate. As the party followed Corrigan around the side of the building, Miss Hawthorne spotted Sergeant Benton and brightened considerably, rushing over to greet her erstwhile hero.

'A pleasure to see you again, Sergeant!'

'And you too, Miss. What brings you all the way out here?'

'Evil, my dear Sergeant. I fear you may have some rescuing left to do before the day is out.'

Taking the wheel of a small, open-topped electric car just big enough for four, Corrigan invited the Brigadier to sit in the front while the Doctor and Miss Hawthorne sat at the back. As Corrigan took them up the hill to the main complex, the wind and the drone of the UNIT lorry behind them afforded the two a degree of privacy. Hawthorne related the details of her vision and the Doctor listened quietly, tapping his lips and nodding as she completed her tale.

'Hmm, I suppose residual psionic energy on that frequency could be received subconsciously by an adept, but I must admit your natural abilities are rather pronounced for a human without any formal training in psionics.'

'Doctor, whatever scientific jargon you wish to employ is beside the point! I have felt the icy touch of an evil that exists beyond this reality. They want to cross over into our world, and this is the gateway... or at least it will be.' Olive looked ahead at the looming edifice and shuddered. 'Science may be the business of these foolish people, Doctor, but magic is at the heart of the coming apocalypse!'

'Science, Miss Hawthorne, is at the heart of everything. If there *is* an apocalypse, science will provide the key to averting it.'

The car pulled up into a slot next to a series of identical cars, and Benton stopped the lorry just outside two huge double doors set well into the front of the structure. Corrigan led the way, and Olive suppressed another shudder as she gathered up her sweater, hefted the strap of the bag she brought with her and followed the party inside. They passed through a bewildering series of checkpoints before the group entered a plain room with an eerie orange glow.

'The absolute latest in sterilisation,' beamed Corrigan as the soldiers peered around nervously. 'As we speak, we are being bombarded with perfectly harmless radiation, assuring that we will be free of all contaminating particles when we enter the accelerator chamber. Can't have any, stray neutrons gumming up the works, eh?' Corrigan laughed, but stopped short when he noted the blank expressions of his guests. 'Oh, don't worry, this has no effect on your weapons. Yes, well, this way then.'

After one last winding corridor, they emerged into an elaborate two

story chamber filled on both levels with technicians and other staff, a warren of electronic computer banks, conduits and scientific personnel endlessly circling the catwalks and passageways throughout the drum-shaped room. In the centre of it all was a towering tube of glass, within which was a twisted bundle of metallic piping, glowing wires and indicators of all sorts like barnacles covering the machine's surface. It was very much like a monstrous version of one of the Doctor's own lash-ups and he admired the primitive hardware with some interest and no small amount of trepidation. The Brigadier stared blankly at it all, dwarfed by the scope of the project. Miss Hawthorne, for her part, huddled near Benton and looked about like a frightened mouse. The room was heavy with the smell of death, she thought.

The Brigadier and Benton conferred briefly and the Sergeant sent several men back to guard the exterior doors. The rest of the squad surrounded the chamber while Corrigan gave everyone a cursory tour. While the Brigadier nodded in synch with the Doctor's reactions to Corrigan's commentary, the Time Lord was examining the machinery with a concerned glare, occasionally laying a hand on a control or hitting to himself as Corrigan nervously watched his every move. Miss Hawthorne stayed close to Sergeant Benton, who took it upon himself to keep an eye on her in particular.

'Not the most hospitable of environments, is it Sergeant?'

'Maybe not, Miss, but when you've seen one of these scientific bases you've seen them all.'

'And that's our little set-up here at BINAR,' Corrigan concluded, pausing to peruse a clipboard handed to him by a technician who then disappeared back into the flow of personnel circulating around them.

'Very impressive, Dr. Corrigan,' the Brigadier smiled. 'Don't understand a bit of it, but it looks to be up to the task.'

'We shall soon see, Brigadier,' Corrigan replied. 'We should be ready to begin the initial experiment in just under an hour.'

'Dr. Corrigan, do you think it's wise to proceed while your facility is plagued by the problems you described earlier?'

'That's what you chaps are here for, isn't it, Doctor? I'm sure with UNIT on site, we should be able to go ahead with the experiment as planned.'

'But you haven't addressed the real issue, have you?' the Doctor continued, stuffing his hands in his pockets and facing Corrigan in an almost challenging posture. 'This plan of yours to mine the mysteries of the subatomic. Don't you think it might be at the root of your problems?'

'It is indeed!' Miss Hawthorne stepped forward and joined the two scientists. 'Dr. Corrigan, there are forces awaiting the call and they are aware of your plans! They've been reaching into the minds of your fellow scientists. They are the cause of the visions. Visions of the end of all things! You must stop this at once before it's too late.'

'Yes, well, while I appreciate a different viewpoint, I don't see how...'

'Dr. Corrigan, please forgive Miss Hawthorne's somewhat parochial view of things, but surely as a scientist you understand the value of proceeding with caution and precision.'

'I do indeed, Doctor, but you must also understand that I am operating under a great deal of pressure. Our funding is at a low ebb and we face competition from several other installations, all trying to break the boundary of knowledge that lies before us. The Ministry is most concerned that we be seen to take the forefront in this search, and I am the man on the chopping block, so to speak,' Corrigan chuckled nervously. 'I simply have to press on!'

The Doctor rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully and regarded Corrigan silently for a moment. 'Yes. Yes of course you do.' Stepping back to join the Brigadier and Benton, the Doctor spoke in hushed tones. Olive leaned in to hear as Corrigan was caught up in conferring with several technicians on the floor.

'I hope your men are ready for anything, Brigadier.'

'Do you really think something will happen when they turn this thing on?' The Brigadier glanced up at the accelerator. If anything could rip open the fabric of the universe, he concluded, it would be this towering machine.

'I think it might be a good idea to be prepared... in every way possible,' the Doctor added, looking at Miss Hawthorne meaningfully.

A short while later, the tension in the room had increased significantly,

with all personnel at their assigned stations monitoring power flow and other sensitive equipment as the UNIT soldiers stood around the outer walls, weapons at the ready. Apart from an odd fainting spell or a few headaches, the BINAR staff were not exhibiting any unusual behaviour, and Corrigan was hurrying about, issuing last-minute instructions and enjoying the moment. In an observation alcove near the glass partition separating the rest of the chamber from the accelerator itself, the Doctor, Miss Hawthorne, Lethbridge-Stewart and Sergeant Benton were huddled together, looking up at the flurry of activity all around them.

As Corrigan ordered the beginning of the experiment, the Doctor muttered something to Miss Hawthorne, who nodded in understanding and began rooting around in the tattered bag slum over her left shoulder. She withdrew a piece of chalk and started to draw a wide circle around them. Corrigan passed by and stared incredulously.

'What on Earth are you doing?'

'Just a precaution, Dr. Corrigan,' the Doctor replied calmly. 'If you're foolish enough to continue with this experiment, we need to prepare for every contingency.' Miss Hawthorne completed the circle and stood up smartly, admiring her work. The Brigadier sighed and Corrigan shook his head in disbelief, laughing as he resumed his manic pace.

'What's all this chalk circle nonsense, Doctor?'

'Just stay put Brigadier. You too, Sergeant.'

'Don't worry Doctor. I'm not planning on moving.' Benton shot the Brigadier a worried glance, who returned it with a disdainful glare. Miss Hawthorne closed her eyes and muttered an incantation under her breath.

Corrigan called for the activation of the main accelerator sequence, and within minutes the lights in the chamber had dimmed as the room was filled with a deafening noise. As the staff scurried about the room, the banks of computers flickered and buzzed as the unseen particles in the accelerator began to offer up their secrets. Everything seemed to be proceeding just as expected...

The far wall exploded in a shower of sparks as an entire row of video screens shattered, consumed by an unearthly green glow. A technician stationed nearby shrieked in agony and fell to the floor as

several of the other staffers and a UNIT guard rushed to help him. Corrigan was babbling something about remaining at stations as the Doctor urged the Brigadier and Benton to remain where they were.

'But we've got to do something!'

'We will, Brigadier, we will. But we can't help anyone if we're dead. For once, just listen to me and do nothing.'

As they watched, the glow extended around the chamber, disrupting more equipment as everyone screamed and raced to the centre of the room. Corrigan was frantically yelling for everyone to calm down when suddenly he too was engulfed by the glow. It grew around him and took shape as a whirling storm of wind and electricity, trapped inside the room and apparently eager to escape. Corrigan screamed and shielded his eyes, but the storm swallowed him whole. He vanished into nothingness. The Doctor called out to the remaining staff, desperately trying to be heard above the howling winds.

'All of you, get down and stay down! Don't touch anything if you value your lives!'

As the humans complied, the Doctor stared with a mixture of wonder and horror at the anomaly growing in the centre of the room. Suddenly, the swirling maelstrom opened as if from inside, and piercing light streamed into the chamber. The Doctor could see movement within the opening. A lifeform of some kind was reaching into this dimension from another reality. The tear widened, and the Doctor stepped closer. He examined the rift carefully, objectively, noting the hue and intensity in an attempt to calculate exactly the origin point and nature of the incursion. His mind ticked off dimensional figures one by one, computing a myriad number of complex equations. None of them offered much comfort, but he was certain that his worst fears were about realised. He whispered something into Miss Hawthorne's ear, and she listened carefully, turning to meet his gaze and nod in agreement.

In the heart of the rift, the being resolved itself, growing more visible and well defined with every passing second. Finally, as the energies in the room continued to swirl and pulse about the tear, a face appeared. Not a human face by any stretch of the imagination, but a reasonable approximation of features manipulated by a force of incredible power.

The glowing particles shaped the nose and mouth, and the outline was framed by a cloud of charged energy that sputtered and flashed. It had a piercing gaze that transfixed everyone in the room. It was a face of pure malevolence... and it was smiling.

'At last!' the face said with a voice that filled the hall with its bombastic tones, a sound that echoed like thunder in the vast chamber. 'After an eternity of endless nothingness, at last the time of dissolution is at hand! All things will end and freedom will be ours!'

'Who are you?' the Doctor called out over the howling winds that raced around the room. The face turned to see the Doctor, and it addressed him directly.

'We are the oldest living force in the universe, Time Lord! We were present when matter first coalesced! We brought all things into being! But we were trapped, forced to dwell in the nether regions while the universe developed and life took hold on countless worlds. We were left to languish in eternal agony, but now time of incarceration is ended! We are the source of all matter, Time Lord! The energy that binds the cosmos itself! We are the Gluons!'

'What do you intend to do?'

'Isn't it obvious, Time Lord? We have been imprisoned and now these fools have released us! We will dissolve all matter in the universe, consume all planets, all stars, and remake reality to our own ends. We will no longer serve the cosmos! We will reshape it to serve us!'

'But you can't!' The Doctor took another step forward, careful not to leave the circle etched on the floor. 'Don't you see, the universe has grown beyond you! It has used your energies to create beauty and life throughout space and time. If you dissolve the bond now, everything will be destroyed!'

'Exactly, Time Lord! But we will survive and create a new universe, one in which we are free to live and grow and rule all things!'

The UNIT soldier nearest the chalk circle moved away from the wall and levelled his rifle at the huge being reaching out from the rift. As the Doctor and the Brigadier tried to protest, their voices were lost in the winds, and the soldier fired at the Gluon. It cackled derisively and emitted a burst of bright green energy that enveloped the hapless

soldier and immolated him. As he dissolved into non-existence, the destructive force arced towards the Doctor and slammed against an invisible circular barrier that illuminated around them, causing the energy to dissipate harmlessly in the air. The Brigadier and Benton were awe-struck.

'The chalk circle?' Lethbridge-Stewart finally choked.

'Yes, Brigadier, I did tell you to stay put. I have a plan.' The Doctor turned to Olive, who looked up at him with a determined stare.

'I want you to concentrate, Miss Hawthorne. There's very little time.' Hawthorne nodded nervously, her eyelids blinking rapidly. 'Concentrate on my mind. I will give you the necessary power to face this creature. All you need to do is use your magic and direct its consciousness into the accelerator. Do you understand?'

'I think so, Doctor, but I thought you didn't believe in magic!'

'Right now, Miss Hawthorne, magic is precisely what we need! Are you ready?' Hawthorne nodded again, and the Doctor placed his fingertips lightly on her temples.

'Contact,' he said quietly. Miss Hawthorne echoed the word.

'Now, Miss Hawthorne!'

The frail, frightened woman mustered up her courage, turning her concentration inward and recalling the wide-eyed enthusiasm of young Laura as she described the power of magic to the girl. If ever there was a time to believe, this was it. Olive stepped from the circle into the swirling energies that now threatened to burst from the chamber and engulf the world. Raising her hands once more in an invocation, her sweater and bag whipped about in the fierce winds, Miss Hawthorne tried to keep her eyes fixed on the face of the beast before her as she began. The creature laughed, a cold sound that echoed in the antiseptic confines of the chamber.

'What is this? A primitive human to turn us back, Time Lord? Are you so lacking in courage that you send this puny thing to face our might? We will not be stopped by the mutterings of a microbe, not when we have longed for this day since time began!'

The Gluon being reached out to crush Miss Hawthorne, but her voice gained in strength, repeating an incantation designed to exorcise an occupying spirit from a host. Olive hoped that in this situation, the

spell would have the desired effect of expelling the Gluon consciousness. Behind her, just inside the circle, the Doctor was echoing her words, their mental link strengthening as they worked in concert.

'Turn away from this plane, oh creature of evil! I cast you back, back to the shadow realm from whence you came!'

The Gluon being halted, stunned by a sudden change in the energy field it had created. Miss Hawthorne's spell was working! The storm was subsiding slowly, the rift sealing around the creature as it raged and tried to escape the force of her incantation. As the Gluon felt itself being dragged into the accelerator, it could feel its consciousness splitting from the field of particles in which it had dwelled for millennia, travelling to another dimension, where it would have no power to return.

'Noooo! This cannot be! We cannot be defeated now, not when we were so close to freedom, to the ultimate powerrrrrr...'

A brilliant flash of light and a sound like a thunderclap sent Olive and those in the circle to the floor, joining the BINAR technicians who were still cowering in terror around the chamber. The rift was gone, and the winds were reduced to a small gust that settled as papers that were strewn about drifted gracefully to the ground. The chamber was a wreck, with machinery torn to pieces and sparking electronics still sputtering here and there. The accelerator itself was a tower of carbonised matter, a huge ebony pillar of scorched wiring and melted plastic that stood behind the remaining shards of glass that still sat in a twisted metal frame.

Olive blinked and opened her eyes, lowering her arms and looking about in amazement. Noticing the others beginning to stand, she went to help Sergeant Benton to his feet as the Brigadier and the Doctor dusted glass and metal fragments from their clothes.

'Are you all right, Sergeant?'

'I think so, Miss. But it looks like the damsel in distress saved a few knights this time around!'

Leaving the Brigadier and Benton to mop things up, the Doctor led Miss Hawthorne from the ruined chamber and out to greet the waning hours

of the day. As they emerged, the sun was beginning to set over the hillside, and they strolled casually down the path.

'Are you certain the evil has passed, Doctor?'

'Absolutely. By redirecting the Gluon consciousness back into the particle accelerator, you were able to assist the accelerator in breaking down the particle structure of the Gluon being, effectively separating the malevolent consciousness from the energy itself. The Gluon field will remain where it belongs, binding the fabric of space-time together, while the consciousness has been trapped in another dimension where it can't harm anyone ever again. Your people can poke and prod about in the subatomic all they like now. Science triumphs again!'

'I don't understand, Doctor. Wasn't it magic that ended up saving us? Isn't that exactly what I used?'

'It was science, Miss Hawthorne, it always was. Your natural ability to tap into and redirect psionic energy enabled us to reverse the polarity of the neutron flow and seal the rift between realities. All you needed was a bit of a power boost from my mind.'

'But what about the chalk circle, Doctor? Surely that was relying on magic to protect us!'

'Not at all, Miss Hawthorne,' the Doctor replied, his hands resting in his jacket pockets, his head inclined in a relaxed posture. 'No, the exact composition of the circle in opposition to the Gluon field set up an interference barrier that temporarily placed us out of phase with this reality the moment the cross-dimensional rift opened. We were able to repair the rift through that field but we were shielded from the destructive force of the Gluons' power. If we hadn't sealed the rift when we did, even that wouldn't have protected us for long. Fortunately, the Gluons needed time to grow in strength after bridging the gap between their dimension and ours.'

Olive blinked rapidly, unable to reconcile her beliefs with the facts as the Doctor described them. They paused along the path, breathing in the crisp air as they watched the sun set.

'I suppose we will simply have to agree to disagree, Doctor,' Hawthorne finally replied. 'In the end, does it really matter whether it was science or magic? Whatever it is, it worked. But for my part, I think the world is a much more interesting place if it were magic,

Doctor. That is what I choose to believe in.'

'Miss Hawthorne, I wouldn't dream of dissuading you.'

'And what about you, Doctor, what do you believe in? Only science?'

The Doctor paused. 'My dear Miss Hawthorne,' the Doctor replied with a sparkle in his eye, 'I believe in you.'

Olive blushed and smiled as the Doctor offered the crook of his velvet-clad elbow. Together they walked arm in arm down the hill as a floral breeze drifted down the hillside. It smelled of lavender, with just a hint of magic.

In The Frame

STEVE LYONS

'Ok,' said Ace, when they were left alone in the cell at last, 'you'd better tell me what's going on, hadn't you?' She folded her arms and gave him the well-practised stare. The one that, hopefully, said that she was in control; that she would brook no more of his obfuscation.

The Doctor just smiled, and a new, white business card appeared between his fmgers, where there had been nothing before. With an effort, Ace stopped her eyes from straying towards it. 'It's quite simple,' said the Doctor. 'I'm your solicitor.'

'I don't care how you got in here. I just want to know what you're planning this time.'

'What makes you think I'm planning anything?'

Ace grimaced. 'It's not every day you get picked up by the pigs, you know. Not when you're just minding your own business.'

'Police!' corrected the Doctor, sternly.

'Yeah, whatever.' Ace lay back against her thin pillow and swung her legs up onto the hard, uncomfortable mattress. 'I've never spent the night in a police cell before,' she said. 'Well, not on Earth. Not in my own time. Not even after Gabriel Chase.'

The Doctor sat beside her, and knocked her feet back to the floor with one fluid movement. He flipped something onto the sheet where they had been. A pink plastic comb. And a small, circular mirror. Ace took them, careful not to appear too grateful. 'Tell me what you already know,' he said.

She affected disinterest as she ran the comb through her bedraggled hair. But she angled the glass so that it reflected her companion's eyes, alerting her to any clues therein. The slightest flicker. 'Some cops have disappeared. No one knows why. They can't even find any bodies.'

'And they think you're responsible?' An arched eyebrow. But no clues in the eyes. Not yet.

'They reckon they've got proof. They've got a photograph. Sent to them anonymously. Along with details of where to find me.' She laced this last point with heavy accusation. That, more than anything, suggested his involvement.

'Have you seen it?' he asked mildly.

'For a few seconds, yeah.'

'And it looked like this?'

Ace blanched as it appeared from nowhere. The photograph. Lying on the bed between them. Staring up at her with its impossible accusation.

She had been right. She was going to kick his face in.

Not yet, though.

'Funny what can turn up in your pockets, isn't it?' A hard edge to her voice belied her attempt to out-cool him. She produced a metal, insect-like device, no more than a centimetre across. She tossed it onto the picture. 'I found this in mine. In the lining, actually.'

She couldn't resist a smirk at his expense. He actually looked worried.

'You deactivated it?'

'I gave it a crack with my boot. So what?'

'When?' The Doctor's urgency unnerved her, made her question herself.

'A couple of hours ago. Just after I woke up.'

He breathed a sigh of relief. 'It should have found you by then. It will be waiting for the right moment to strike. It can't jeopardise its cover, you see.' He ran his fingers adeptly over the device, smiling as it let out a quiet, tinny chatter. 'There, that should give it a push in the right direction.'

Cool wasn't working. Ace abandoned the façade, and let the more familiar sensation of irritation take over. 'Look, Professor, are you going to tell me what you've done to me or what?'

'Look at the photograph. Tell me what you think.'

She was tempted to do just that. But he was on the verge of giving her the truth, in his own frustrating, roundabout way, so she bit back the scornful words and played along. 'It looks like me. But it can't be. I've never knifed anyone, let alone a copper.'

'No?'

'I'd remember,' she said pointedly.

It felt weird looking at it. Like staring into some parallel universe. The image was in black and white, so there was no identifying its bland, grey background. But nor was there any mistaking the figure that stood beside the prostrate body of a man in police uniform, his own face turned to the ground so that he was unrecognisable. The flash of the camera had reflected off something in the figure's right hand. It was blurred by motion, but what else could it be but a blade? Worst of all was the smile that twisted photograph-Ace's face. The smile that could, in the circumstances, only be interpreted as one of ghoulish satisfaction at her kill.

'So, what does that suggest?'

Ace shrugged. 'Amnesia? Mind control?' The Doctor gave her no reaction. 'An evil twin, then.' Something about him, some barely perceptible shift in his expression, told her that she was warm. 'I'm right, aren't I? It's a picture of a shape-shifter.'

'You might say that, yes.'

'Holy B-Movie aliens, Batman! So, what is it doing in my shape?'

'Who said it was in your shape?'

'Now what are you talking about?'

'I'm tying up a loose end, Ace.'

'As usual.'

'An alien. A shape stealer. A member of the V'rassi race.'

'On Earth?'

'It's gathering intelligence.'

'And you're planning to lure it here with that bug thing?'

'It's here already. According to my energy scans, the shape stealer has been spending rather a lot of time in this building. Probably working its way through the forms of the people who work here. Feeding off their life energies until their bodies crumble to dust.' There was a restrained anger in the Doctor's voice as he described the atrocities.

'So, you set me up as bait?' Ace was becoming pretty angry herself.

The Doctor tapped the metal insect device. 'No, this is the bait. It broadcasts on a frequency that is infuriating and yet at the same time

utterly irresistible to the V'rassi brain.'

'So, it's on its way to this room,' Ace deadpanned, suppressing a shiver.

Good cue, she thought wryly, as the heavy cell door was flung open. A fat police sergeant stood on the threshold, sweat crawling down his ruddy face beneath his cap. He was uneasy, his reddened, puffy eyes darting agitatedly from one part of the room to another. 'I'm afraid you'll have to leave now, sir,' he told Ace's so-called solicitor, in a strained voice.

'Why, what's up?' asked Ace, with malicious cheerfulness. She bounded to her feet, plucked the bug from the bed and dangled it tauntingly before the new arrival. 'Something on your mind?'

'Something rubbing you up the wrong way?' chimed in the Doctor.

The police sergeant made a grab for the bug, but Ace snatched it away before proffering it again. 'Looks to me like you're out of shape, mate.'

'Don't go too far, Ace.'

She barely heard the Doctor's warning growl. The creature was upon her, its flesh erupting into boils, its eyes a fiery, penetrating scarlet, its fingers vicelike as they closed around her fragile neck. Ace floundered, gasped for breath, tried to call out and toppled backwards, landing hard on the bed. Her hand flailed, hit something solid, and she reached for it instinctively and pushed it towards her attacker's leering, melting face in a hopelessly defiant gesture.

Unexpectedly, its grip loosened. It reeled away from its prey. It let out an unearthly, high-pitched scream and fell, as if the life had been sucked right out of it.

The scream continued to ring in Ace's ears for a long few seconds, as her brain struggled to make sense of the change in her circumstances. The creature, still wearing its police sergeant's uniform, lay motionless on the cell floor. The skin was beginning to peel from its face, revealing nothing beneath. When finally Ace was able to regain control of her muscles, to pick herself up from the bed and stand gingerly beside the decaying corpse, she looked down at her own right hand and saw the deadly weapon with which she had vanquished the terrible creature.

A small, circular mirror.

And the Doctor was just sitting there, with maddening calm; a passive, unaffected observer.

'The oldest trick in the book,' he intoned. 'Defeating evil by confronting it with its own image. As the V'rassi fled its decaying host and tried to take over your fresh body, the glass repelled its very essence. In its most vulnerable moment, it had nowhere to go. Its threat is ended.'

'And him?' Ace looked sympathetically at the crumpled body, only realising now that it had once been a person; a real, live, flesh-and-blood human being.

'He died a long time ago, I'm afraid. Like all the others. But he will be the last.'

A short, respectful silence was broken by Ace's sudden exclamation: 'They'll think I've topped another one, won't they?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'The V'rassi consciousness placed its host bodies under incredible strain. That's why it burnt them out so quickly. It will have dissolved in a few minutes.'

'And then what? You take the uniform and we bluff our way out of this place, right?'

'Not at all, Ace. I'll simply go to the desk sergeant and demand your immediate release. No evidence, you see.'

'Except for the photograph,' said Ace. She was struggling with her facial muscles. She had meant to stay angry with the Doctor, to give him some much deserved aggravation. But he had won her over, as he always did, and she could feel an unwanted smile imposing itself upon her features.

And then the smile froze, as Ace thought about the photograph, and realised that he hadn't quite told her everything yet.

'Which reminds me,' came the Doctor's voice, and she looked up into the lens of an old-fashioned, box-like camera. 'Say cheese, Ace!'

The Doctor took the photograph.

A Renegades Manifesto

ANGELA P. WADE

'I have devoted the last nine centuries of my lives to the struggle against evil and oppression. I have righted wrongs which in no way affected me, simply because I was the only person who could right them. I have been persecuted, derided, imprisoned, tortured, and, at times, nearly killed, for the sake of freedom, justice, and the dignity of sentient life.

I have earned the contempt, and even fear, of my own kind. I have alienated myself from my people and cut myself off from the world of my birth--by choice, for there have been many times I could have returned to their society, closing my mind to the suffering of others, as they do.

I have chosen, for the sake of my principles, to live among a race which are to me at best, children, at worst, savages. I have witnessed countless acts of their callous brutality, and yet I have always managed to retain a sense of their inner potential for good, and so I serve them, though they and I shall forever be alien to one another.

For the sake of what I believe to be good and true, I have made myself a permanent exile, solitary and homeless among the bright, populous worlds of the universe. And through the course of my wanderings, though I have found no haven or solace for myself, I have saved countless lives, alleviated untold suffering and set dozens of worlds on the path to a better existence. I feel no compulsion to feel guilt at eating ice cream.'

- As spoken by the Doctor, in his sixth incarnation, to his companion Peri, in the food court of a shopping mall in late 20th Century America, in response to a frozen yoghurt stall's claim that their product had 'all of the flavour, none of the guilt' of ice cream. After uttering the above, the Doctor crossed to a Baskin-Robbins on the other side of the food court and ordered a sundae with two flavours of

ice cream--Blueberry Cheesecake and Chocolate Eruption--walnut sauce, sweet coconut sprinkles, whipped cream, and a cherry. As Peri said afterwards, 'He didn't feel very good later on, but he had made his point.'

LISA CONNER

Bedlam

Helen Fayle

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Imagine existence, as viewed in monochrome, in silence.

'Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion.'

I think I read that somewhere.

Dark in here, isn't it?

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'Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass –'

Sarah paused. 'It's no use, Eliot's too gloomy for a day like this.'

The Doctor looked across at her. 'I always preferred old Reverend Dodgson myself – “The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things Of shoes – and ships – and sealing wax – Of cabbages – and kings!”' He declaimed loudly. Sarah stared at him over the edge of her book.

'Hardly poetry.'

'It has a certain elegant eccentricity, you must admit And just as psychologically murky in his own way, was the good Reverend. The little girl was very charming, though.'

'Hmm.' She put the book down. 'I don't know what it is, but there's something about a place this tranquil that makes me nervous. I keep

waiting for something dreadful to happen.'

'After all this time, I thought you'd realise that's not far from the truth.' He lay back in the grass and pushed his hat down over his face.

Sarah looked at their surroundings, and sighed. 'Pity, I was beginning to enjoy it here!'

The cloudless sky had a slight lilac tinge that Sarah found surprisingly restful. With no higher life forms to disturb the flora and fauna, the planet was peaceful, pleasant and clean: no pollutants to spoil the fresh scent of the air – full, she'd noticed, of the heady scent of the flowers that seemed to be so prevalent here. Trees seemed to be a rarity; the hillsides sported nothing but large cycads, although the plants covered the ground thickly. The largest creature she'd seen so far looked like a giant multicoloured hybrid of a dragonfly, a bee and a butterfly. The Doctor seemed to think that they were harmless, however.

'Look at the mouthparts,' he said when she asked. 'It's designed for collecting pollen, or whatever these flowers produce. And there's no sting.' She'd taken his word for it, but there was no chance she was voluntarily getting close to a two foot long flying bug, regardless of how harmless it might be. The Doctor, as ever, had showed no such reticence, managing to get one specimen to alight on his outstretched arm. He'd been most put out when she'd told him that it clashed with his scarf. She stood up and stretched.

'I'm going for a walk, coming?'

The Doctor mumbled something incomprehensible; one hand waved vaguely in her direction. Smiling, Sarah set off, deciding to explore what lay beyond a small hill to the west

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Movement. Colour. Light. Thought. Sound.

Vibration: Objects at rest or in motion. The movement of particles, the dance of the quanta.
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It's all one, when you look at it from the right angle.

Or is that 'look at it from a right angle'?

Madness is in the mind of the beholder.

It's all very confusing.

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Standing on the top of a hill, Sarah looked down into a shallow river valley – and at a large complex of buildings, mostly fallen into ruin, about a quarter of a mile away.

'Uninhabited, eh?' She glanced over her shoulder, back in the direction of where she'd left the Doctor, some five minutes ago. 'Hmmph. Shows how much you know!' She toyed briefly with the idea of going back for him, but decided against it. The place looked deserted after all, and he'd sworn that there were no unpleasant life forms nearby.

Grinning to herself, she started down the hill at a walk, giving in to impulse half way down, and breaking into a run. Laughing breathlessly, she let her momentum carry her forward, enjoying the freedom of movement. Cooped up in the TARDIS too long, she told herself. Just this once, they'd found a nice, quiet, uninhabited planet with the first chance in weeks to relax and recover.

Or had they? For one brief moment, something seemed to brush past Sarah's mind. Standing still, gasping as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice cold water over her, she shivered, despite the warmth of the breeze.

She shrieked as a hand clasped her shoulder.

'You should pay more attention – I could have been anyone!'

'Doctor!' Sarah whirled around and glared at him. 'You were the one who said there was nothing here that could be dangerous, remember?' Just for good measure she thumped him.

'Well,' he said expansively. 'I've been wrong before. It never pays to be careless, Sarah Jane.' He waggled a finger under her nose. 'And it's
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most unlike you to be jumpy.' But he too was looking around as if he didn't feel quite as comfortable anymore.

'I thought I felt something – just for a moment. Maybe I imagined it–'

The Doctor turned his beaming grin on. Positively schizophrenic sometimes, she thought. 'I think we should take a look around, don't you?' He was all bounce now. 'But you stay close to me from now on, understand?' She bit her lip, but held back the retort. Honestly, she could take care of herself. But if it made him feel better... She settled for a little nod instead.

The Doctor pointed at the ruins.

'Do you know, this planet wasn't supposed to be inhabited. Shall we?'

'What about whatever it was that I felt?' Sarah asked. He grinned at her.

'You'll just have to protect me, won't you? Come along Sarah!' And he was off, striding out like a king on a progress through a court, scarf trailing behind him, fluttering in the breeze.

Sarah shook her head. Never, ever, if she lived to be a hundred, did she think she'd come close to understanding him.

She had to run to keep up.

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All that I can tell is I'm insane insane again.

Don't walk on the grass.

Here we go round the prickly pear.

No cacti on this planet. But it has such lovely flowers.

Do pay attention.

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Sarah sat down on a convenient hummock of broad-leafed viridian plants that seemed to be this planet's answer to the universal equation known as 'grass'. Nibbling on a jelly baby, she watched the Doctor as he prowled up and down in front of the largest of the buildings. She stifled a smile as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers and stomped back towards her.

'Language!' Sarah said, overhearing one of the choicer sotto voce comments.

'Hmph.'

She held out a crumpled white paper bag: 'Have a jelly baby instead?'

He took one, then took the bag, sat down heavily beside her, and bit the head off an inoffensive sweet.

'It looks solid. At first touch, it even feels solid – every sense says it's there–'

'So why,' Sarah finished for him 'does your hand go straight through it, you want to know?' She tapped him on the arm and whispered conspiratorially: 'You don't need to declaim, you know – you haven't got an audience!' He shot her a withering look, then stared silently at the sky.

Sarah grinned at him, about to suggest that she thought Time Lord interference a bit unlikely this time, but he just pulled a face at her and balled up the empty bag and tucked it into a pocket, before getting up and heading for the building/illusion/forcefield again. Sarah followed him, shaking her head ruefully.

The buildings were, the Doctor had told her, of human construction. He seemed to think that it was some kind of medical facility. The place was deserted, and the grounds heavily overgrown. From a distance, Sarah had thought that the complex was in ruins. Yet this close, the buildings looked new: there was no sign of rust, weathering, mould – nothing. The Doctor had muttered something about not jumping to conclusions about growth patterns when she'd mentioned that the overgrowth must be an indication of how long they'd been deserted, but he hadn't sounded too convinced.

The real shock for Sarah had been when she'd put her hand out to touch one of the pristine cream walls: her hand had at first touched the

surface she'd expected, then had slowly slipped out of sight – as if, she'd told him, and he'd agreed when he tried it himself, that her hand had pushed through the spaces between the molecules making up the wall.

The Doctor stared at the wall now, his brow furrowed beneath his untidy mop of dark curls.

'It is an impossibility!' He declared eventually in what Sarah always thought of as his loudest 'I'm in a foul mood and I don't care who knows it' voice. He kicked out and almost fell over as his foot passed part way through the structure then hit solidity.

That, of course, was the other thing: the phenomenon wasn't uniform. Sarah caught him and just managed to stop him from falling. He flashed her a grateful look, before sitting down to take his shoe off and rub his foot. She left him to it, and went back to looking closely at the structure for herself.

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And the walls came down.

All the way to hell.

~~~

The entire structure was windowless. The featureless exterior gave the place a melancholy air that was at odds with the peaceful surroundings. Sarah found herself musing on this as she walked around the building again, letting her fingers trail along the almost-but-not-quite-there wall. Such a peaceful, tranquil planet, and yet human settlers had stuck half a dozen buildings down in the middle of this floral paradise; large, ugly, colourless, featureless and utterly out of place in their environment.

What for?

The Doctor's head peered around the corner of the building.

'Sarah?'

'Hmm?'

'Did we think to try the doors?'

'There weren't any.' Sarah walked over to him. 'We both went round the entire building: no doors.' Taking her arm, he steered her over to an area of the wall she'd been over herself not ten minutes earlier. He looked down at her.

'There are now,' he said archly. And putting a hand out, he pushed them gently. To Sarah's surprise, they opened inwards, coming to rest against the inner wall with a slight clunk. She looked up at the Doctor, suddenly apprehensive.

'I don't like this.'

'More strange feelings?' he teased.

She stuck her tongue out at him before replying tartly: 'Well, you have to admit, mysteriously appearing doors where five minutes ago there was a blank wall isn't normal.'

He fixed her with a wide-eyed stare. 'We could go back–' All innocence.

She took a deep breath. 'No. You aren't the only one who can't stand a mystery, you know!' She walked forward into the building, trying to look far more confident than she was feeling.

~~~

Unreal city,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn.

This is where we/I/they wait.

I/We/They/Us

Peek-a-boo.

~~~

Sarah shivered as she crossed the threshold. Something had just

changed. Behind her, she could sense the Doctor following her. This time, when he tapped her on the shoulder, she didn't jump.

'Do you notice anything strange?' he asked, quietly.

'It's light in here,' she whispered back, 'but there are no windows on this floor, and no visible lights.'

She could almost feel his habitual thoughtful frown: no need to turn around to confirm his expression.

'And why,' he asked, still *sotto* voce, 'are we whispering?'

Sarah turned to look at him; he looked edgy. 'Well, you can raise *your* voice if you want to.'

His eyes were everywhere, searching, questioning. Without looking at her, he replied: 'No, somehow I don't think so.'

Sarah wandered down the corridors, half following the Doctor, half trying to look as if she knew what she was looking for on her own, and taking note of her surroundings: Long white antiseptic corridors laid out in a geometric pattern – regular, precise, ordered. Sliding doors, some open, some closed, some in that can't-make-up-their-mind stage, led into blank rooms, all of them the same size and shape.

All empty.

Sarah stood just inside the doorway to one of them and examined it. Like dozens she'd seen before it, it was stark, cold and bare. Just one clue, she thought. Just one notice, or item, or sign. Anything that could tell her what this place was. Or what was lurking here.

Because she could feel it.

It wasn't a localised presence. For a brief moment, she had the strangest feeling she was inside something. But a something that was gnawing at the edges of her mind like a rat worrying a piece of rubbish.

Time to go, and sod curiosity. Backing out of the room, she went looking for the Doctor.

~~~

Ring-a-ring-a-roses

Is it like this
~~~

We all fell down.

Ashes to ashes

In death's other kingdom

Dust to dust.

~~~

He was standing in front of a doorway that marked the end of this corridor. Reaching him, she placed her hand on his arm.

'Doctor?' Something in the room, perhaps... she tried to see past him, but he pushed her away, abruptly.

'No, Sarah.'

Sarah sighed. 'You can't tell me that there's anything in there worse than we've faced before?'

She thought that he was going to argue, but instead, he moved aside to let her past, and stood beside the doorway, hands thrust deep into his pockets. She walked slowly into the room and stopped, staring in horror at the sight that greeted her.

There were bodies everywhere.

She backed away involuntarily, brought up short as she bumped into the Doctor's solid bulk. His arm was around her waist, supporting her, and she turned, burying her head for a moment against his chest. The material of his scarf was rough against her cheek. Straightening, she looked up and into his eyes, seeing the concern there, as he awkwardly patted her on the back.

'Nothing you can't handle?' If his slightly mocking tone was an attempt to distract her, she wasn't in the mood. Determined not to show her revulsion she met his gaze as steadily as she could.

'I've seen worse than that.' *If not by much*, she thought. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she walked into the room, taking in the scene. The bodies – maybe twenty or thirty of them – lay scattered
~~~

over the floor like so many broken branches. A brown crust of dried blood, powdered where she and the Doctor had trodden on it, covered everything – bodies, floor, and walls. The corpses themselves drew the eyes, a morbid tableau of destruction, and she studied the scene with a horrified fascination: twisted, broken, torn and scattered. It looked as if something had simply walked in and torn them apart.

Except that wasn't the case at all. Not even close. She knelt beside one of the bodies. A human female. Sarah placed her hand delicately on the body, and swallowed a sudden rise of bile in her throat as her fingers brushed the leathery, yet strangely brittle skin. The corpse had dried rather than decayed. She'd been young, perhaps even pretty when alive. The girl's hands covered her face, the fingers embedded in the eye sockets. Another body, further along, had a hand buried deep in his own torso, a desiccated coil of his own intestines wrapped around his wrist. Some of the others were huddled together, entwined so closely that it was hard to tell if they'd been trying to stop each other from mutilating themselves, or had joined in the frenzy by attacking each other.

Sarah looked back at the Doctor, knowing that he saw the answer, but needing to say it anyway.

'They did this to themselves,' she said quietly. Very gently, she laid a hand on the girl's head, feeling the brittle hair crinkle and break under her fingers. There was a whispering, in her head, on the very edge of perception.

'It's just a memory away,' she said, and slumped to the ground.

'Sarah!' Three long strides took the Doctor into the room and to her side. She lay curled slightly on the floor, one hand still on the dead girl's head. He turned her over gently. Despite her apparent relaxed position, every muscle was rigid.

'Oh, Sarah.' He brushed her hair back from her face, and checked her over quickly, finding no physical damage. Being careful to avoid disturbing her too much, he picked her up, a little awkwardly, and carried her from the room and out of the building. He was struggling by the time he'd reached what he hoped was a reasonable distance from the complex. Laying Sarah on the grass, he stared down at her, a

worried frown on his face.

'You're putting on weight, my girl.' He knelt at her side, checking her over. Her pulse was strong, but erratic. He was just about to check her eyes, when without warning, they sprang open, and she threw herself at him, hands clawing at his face and screaming incoherently. He slapped her across the face, once, hard enough to leave a mark.

Just as suddenly, she was still, staring at him, and then at her surroundings, shocked.

'What happened?' She asked. She glared at him then and rubbed her cheek. 'Ow, that hurt!'

The Doctor's smile was rueful. 'I'm sorry, desperate measures, I'm afraid.' He helped her to stand up. 'Are you all right?'

She leaned on his arm for support. 'I think so. She looked back at the complex and shuddered. 'Down there–'

'What happened? Do you remember?'

Sarah nodded. 'I touched that girl – and something touched me. There's a kind of – focus – I suppose you'd call it – in there.'

'You said something about “A memory away” before you passed out,' the Doctor reminded her. 'Can you remember what you meant?'

'The whole place,' Sarah looked at him, hazel eyes fixed on his. 'It's a memory – that's why it's not quite real.'

He snorted. 'I don't mean to belittle your insight, Sarah. But that's not possible. That place is solid–' He paused. 'Well, almost,' he conceded. 'Are you trying to tell me that what we felt and saw – and touched – back there – was an illusion? Poppycock!'

'Who are you trying to convince?' Sarah asked. 'I know what I felt. And I know what I saw.'

'Given enough energy, it's possible, I suppose. A lot of energy. And I didn't see anything there that would account for that level of projection. Did you?'

Sarah chewed her bottom lip. 'No. But I have a theory.'

'Well, enlighten me!' he snapped at her, worry, as usual, masked by irritation.

'The planet itself.' Sarah said simply. The Doctor looked sceptical.

'The planet.'

'Like Zeta Minor, remember? I had the screaming heebie jeebies

from the moment we landed there. This feels – well, not the same. But similar.'

He was standing in an instant, pacing. 'Of course. Low level mental fields generated by all lifeforms, even the lowest.' He stared down at her. 'You know, even in your time someone had stumbled onto that theory, you know.'

Sarah thought for a moment, then snapped her fingers. 'Teilhard de Chardin – the so called “Noosphere”. I remember wading through *The Phenomenon of Man* years ago. Aunt Lavinia insisted!' She paused. 'But that was all discredited.'

'Well, the theory was somewhat before its time, really. His ideas didn't regain much credence until measurable psychic abilities turned up in the human race over a century later.' He was staring moodily at the buildings below.

'You know, I think I know what that place was,' he said eventually.

'I suppose you're going to tell me?'

'Suppose it was a mental hospital. An asylum. The residual emanations of a place like that would be terrifyingly powerful. Enough aberrant mental energy concentrated in a place that has had no higher mental activity to mould its noosphere...' She'd rarely seen him look afraid, but the look he turned on her now made her shiver. 'They could have killed each other then turned on themselves, tearing themselves apart. Whatever insanities they had would have been multiplied a thousand fold by what's here. By what their arrival drove to madness: A paradise planet, with no higher lifeforms, no value as a colony or a mining outpost. A perfect place to dump the insane, the weak minded, the psychotic.' He snorted. 'Of course, I'm guessing, but–'

'Well I'm convinced.' She shivered, despite the warm breeze. Suddenly, Eden looked a lot more menacing.

He stared over the top of her head, looking at the peaceful, pastoral scene. 'A primitive, but untainted noosphere,' he whispered. 'Where nothing evolved to dominate the low-level mental fields generated by the interaction of life.' He looked down at Sarah. 'Unlike Earth, which has spawned at least three sentient lifeforms, and suffered interference from outside forces over its history.'

Sarah gripped his sleeve. 'Until *they* came. So many minds, and if they *were* mad...'

'They'd be open. They couldn't help but interact with it. They must have impressed it with a multitude of psychoses, delusions and fears. It might have taken decade or two, but we're talking about a low-level psychic field that can be extremely psycho-reactive under even the best circumstances. Eventually it would have begun to manifest their fears, and feed back into their minds. In the end, even the medical staff would have gone insane. What we saw –'

'Was the last act. The last few – the ones who lasted longest.' Sarah finished for him. 'Leaving a lasting psychic impression, and a physical manifestation?'

'It might get worse,' The Doctor said quietly. 'Something similar to this happened on a planet called Shiva, I remember reading about in the Academy. You didn't want to be there after dark.'

Sarah raised an eyebrow.

'Physical manifestation of some of the nastier archetypes from the human unconscious. A noosphere is capable of magnifying and giving form to every thought or feeling – conscious or subconscious,' the Doctor explained. 'It makes no distinction between the two. As here, there were so few lifeforms that the effects can be considerable. They had to destroy the planet eventually.'

'Then maybe we'd better get out of here?' Sarah suggested. The Doctor, however, was already moving.

She had to run to keep up with him. As usual.

~~~

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act
~~~

Falls the shadow

I/we/they are not a shadow.

Reality

Conception or perception?

They see. At last.

~~~

The TARDIS stood in the middle of the meadow where they'd landed: squatting serenely in the sea of grass as if oblong shaped blue boxes had every right to sprout there, in defiance of the laws of taste and nature. Sarah, relieved to see a safe haven, started to move towards it, only to find the Doctor holding her back.

'Not yet. Do you notice anything strange?'

She turned around to look, but there was nothing there except their shadows stretching out behind them across the grass.

'Just our shadows. Why?' Then she realised. 'Oh. The sun's over there.'

Their shadows stretched away from them in two directions. But the shadows in the wrong place were multiplying, overlapping, growing. She looked around the meadow again, but could see nothing except the waving grass, darkening in the failing light, the TARDIS's shadow the only mark on its viridian perfection.

The shadow.

It rippled, borne on the waving fronds of greenery, a deeper inky black against the deepening gloom of the clearing. First a wavering oblong, the edges fluttering randomly as the evening breeze ruffled the greenery. But her eyes were drawn deeper into the umbra, seeing impossible shapes: a mass of writhing tentacles reminiscent of some Lovecraftian horror from beyond the dawn of time, that crawled over
~~~

the ground in directions that defied the optical laws. And yet, at the same time, flickering on the edge of her vision, she could see – what? A hint of some monstrous claw? A leathery wing arching over the back of some anti-diluvian crocodilian? She shook her head, as if to clear it. Illusions, hallucinations, surely? She looked over at the Doctor, and saw the look of concern on his face. No, he saw it as well.

Whatever “it” was...

And the whispering, once on the distant edge of perception, now so loud that she twisted her head this way and that, trying to see who was beside her. But there was only the Doctor, dark curls bouncing in the breeze, expression made angular and almost cruel by the cast of shadows across his face, and the intent, wide-eyed stare as he looked at the TARDIS, the peeling blue paint of its exterior darkening as they watched, as if the shadows were poured over its surface.

The sky was now a deep, velvety purple, as the sun sank below the line marked by the giant cycads. Sarah drew closer to the Doctor, seeking reassurance from his presence.

'What now?' she asked. Movement in the long grass caught her eye, as if something scuttled through the long leafy plants, hidden in the foliage. *Something that scuttled on eight long legs, shiny black body held above the ground...*

His fear? Or hers?

'Doctor?' More urgently.

'What? I don't –' he came back to her with a start, squeezed her hand reassuringly. 'It's concentrating on the TARDIS, we're just incidental. Try not to worry about anything.'

'Easier said than done,' she told him tartly. She shivered, aware that with the fast-setting sun, the warmth of the day was fading.

'It's mindless... surely?' The Doctor stared past her, to the TARDIS, now a deeper shade of dark amidst the growing shadow. 'Reactive, not pro-active.' Thinking out loud, Sarah thought.

'Why the TARDIS then – I mean, if it's reacting to thoughts and fears?' She broke off, seeing his face, even in the intensifying gloom, take on an even more worried look.

'The TARDIS is no machine, Sarah. If it can breach the defences

surrounding the telepathic circuits...'

Sarah interrupted him. 'But what nightmares could a TARDIS manifest?'

The Doctor balled a fist in his curls, almost tearing the hair out.

'Doctor?'

He pulled her away, and pushed her towards the hill where they'd sat earlier, reading. *When this had still seemed such an idyllic spot*. 'Wait here.' He told her in the voice that told her in no uncertain terms that she'd better do as he said. His long legs were taking him back down the hill towards the TARDIS before she could frame a retort. The darkness swallowed him before he reached the foot of the hill. Were the shadows drawing in around her as well? She looked around, wrestling with indecision. What would her demons be?

She made her mind up.

'Not bloody likely,' Sarah muttered to the direction the Doctor had taken. She set off after him.

The darkness was complete by the time he reached the foot of the hill. Not the total blackness of an absence of light, for there was still enough to see the deeper black of the TARDIS's familiar bulk, but an inky shadow that covered everything. The darkness that doesn't go away when you turn on the light.

A darkness that picked at the Doctor's mind as he approached the shadow-wrapped TARDIS, and whispered at the very limits of his hearing. Snippets of songs, of conversations, of poems, and cries, and screams... It threatened, it pleaded, it cajoled, promised. But in a fragmentary fashion. As if...

As if searching for context, for words, concepts. Picking through his and Sarah's minds for some basis for communication, sprinkled with a scattering of repeated phrases.

Except that it wasn't talking to him. Had never been talking to him.

They weren't talking to *him*.

They wanted the other mind. The TARDIS.

Was *She* answering? He couldn't tell.

It/They was/were aware of him again. Something moved in the darkness, and he tried not to think what it might be. *Why had he left*

Sarah alone? What if…

He buried the thought. It would be used, turned against him. Concentrate, Doctor. Without the TARDIS...

Sarah, alone...

No. Concentrate.

Too late, as always. Something seized upon tendrils of feeling and fear, with what might have been a malicious delight. Scenario after scenario played out behind closed eyes.

Sarah dead. Sarah shot, crying his name. Sarah blinded terrified. Sarah trapped in the darkness, alone. Sarah lost in a blasted wasteland on a dead planet, while a war raged around, torn apart on a shining metal slab... Image after image flashed before his eyes, and he fell to his knees, trying to block them, deny them.

'No!'

'Doctor?' Sarah called out for him, hearing his cry. Stumbling in the gloom, she fell over him. Flailing to keep her balance, and failing, she screamed as images flashed behind closed eyes: *Flicker*: darkness, and the terrifying sensation of blindness. *Flicker*: she was dying, the Doctor leaning over her, saying something... *flicker* Lying in a hospital bed, an old woman, a knarled, age-spotted hand resting on the rough leather of an old book – *Le Morte d'Ar– Flicker: lying on a cold metal slab, sharp knives pricking at her skin... Flicker, flicker, flickerflickerflicker...*

She screamed, and curled up into a ball, as if making herself smaller would somehow make it stop.

Something washed over her, like a dash of cold water on a hot summer day.

Blue. Cool blue. Sea blue. Dark Blue. Comforting. Cool.

White.

The images stopped, but she stayed where she was, huddled on the ground.

'Sarah!' A hand on her arm. With a whimper she hit out wildly, connected with something solid. Her hand brushed the familiar feel of rough wool. The Doctor's scarf. Her fingers closed on the material, and

she couldn't hide a sob of relief. The Doctor patted her on the back.

'There there, it's all right. I think it's stopped for now.'

She peered into the darkness, seeing only the vaguest impression of his face. 'I felt... I was... I saw...'

'Sshh. We've got a little time.' He helped her to her feet. 'Stay close.' His hand closed reassuringly on hers.

What had he seen? 'What happened?'

'I think the TARDIS distracted it, when we were threatened. Whatever's out there, the old girl seems to be its main target.'

The TARDIS was shrouded in shadows of shadows, still, overlapping pools of darkness that radiated a chill menace. She followed the Doctor's lanky form as he moved around to face the doors, pondering their next move.

'Can we get in?'

'Not without letting *it* in. I don't think it can attack the telepathic circuits from outside, no matter how strong its motivation.'

'It – or them?' Sarah asked dryly. She couldn't see his expression, but she could picture him sticking his bottom lip out the way he did when pondering something.

'I'm not sure the question's relevant,' he said eventually. 'Possibly it's some hybrid matrix – an amalgam of the personality patterns of the asylum inmates and the planet's noosphere.'

Sarah put her hands on her hips, although the effect was lost in the darkness surrounding them – night had fallen truly. She couldn't tell madness-spawned shadow from genuine night anymore. 'But there's got to be a way out, hasn't there?' *Before "it" notices us again...*

'Maybe.' The Doctor pouted moodily, and kept staring at the TARDIS, still wrapped in writhing shadows. 'Just maybe...'

'What?'

The Doctor ignored her, brushed her aside as he stepped forward, walking towards the TARDIS. Her hand grabbing his shirt sleeve didn't even slow him down: her fingers slipped from the white cotton as if it were water in her hand. Reaching into the shadow, he placed his hand upon the surface of the time machine. To Sarah, struggling to see in the gloom, it looked as if the shadows had simply swallowed him.

There was nothing. Or an absence. No context.

Only the rough/slick surface of the TARDIS's exterior shell, the eternal paradox of what is and what merely *appears to be*.

All else was darkness.

And sound.

The cacophony of thousands of voices, each clamouring to be heard.

Enough to drive anyone mad.

In the midst of the word he was trying to say...

'What do you want?'

The words fell, leaden, in the dark, lost in the voices.

Which seemed to turn their attention to *him*, at last.

Good. Now to keep it/them distracted.

The temptation, however, to learn, to ask, to understand...

Don't get distracted, Doctor. It's the *other* mind you need. Now...

The clamour of voices rose to a howl, filling his senses to overload. Dimly, he was aware of a change. In posture? His hand slid *down* the TARDIS surface, and he pressed harder, desperate not to lose contact.

The Other... the female... there...

'No!' The Doctor sensed the shift in focus, as the entity/gestalt of the noosphere turned its attention onto the easier target. Desperately, he tried to intercept, to distract. Sarah's mind, dimly felt in the morass of insanity that surrounded them. Frail, by comparison, but burning more strongly than he might have thought.

You WILL NOT have her.

'You're just a snark!' A random thought, the insult implied and understood even if the sense was not. “It” seized upon the images his mind offered, integrating them into its fractured psyche, into the madness.

...in the midst of his laughter and glee...

Was it fixed on him again? He had to hope.

There. He had its attention.

'You. Will. Not. Have. Her.' Did he mean the TARDIS? Or Sarah?

Did it matter?

Whispers in the dry grass...

Take you, then...

'Never!'

Defiance flung out to the uncaring *totality* that gibbered inside, outside and between his mind Fragments of lives lived, lost, taken, fractured were flung back at him. Death, pain, death, anger, fear, death, delight, ecstasy...

There.

A familiar touch, rarely acknowledged, even more rarely approached. The sense only of – what?

Blue.

Cool blue, washing away the voices like a tide ebbing from the shore.

...he shall softly and silently vanish away...

And the voices were gone, the darkness vanished, replaced by bright light, and white.

'For the snark *was* a boojum, you see!'

Sarah awoke at the sound of the Doctor's voice declaiming loudly. He lay on his side, a few feet away from her on the console room floor, eyes shut tight. Pushing herself up at least as far as her knees, she crawled over to him, and tapped him on the shoulder. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor opened one blue eye, and squinted, then opened the other. He flashed a toothy, falsely cheery grin at her, and tried to stand up. Unfortunately, he'd been lying with his head under the angular bulk of the TARDIS console. For the next couple of minutes, the console room reverberated almost to the sound of him swearing in fluent Venusian, one hand clutching the top of his head.

'What happened?' Sarah asked, once he'd calmed down. He didn't answer her immediately, just busied himself with setting the controls on the console. Only when the familiar asthmatic wheeze of the TARDIS's dematerialisation split the air, fading as they entered the relative calm of the vortex, did he speak.

'Rather too much like falling down the Mad Hatter's rabbit hole. Or is that rather “more like being stuffed head first into a tea pot.” Either way, I don't recommend that place as a holiday spot.' He didn't look at

her, he just stared morosely at the console.

'That's not...'

'No. No it isn't.' He finally turned to stare at her, and she shivered. 'You touched only the fringes of it, Sarah.' One hand raised, as if to touch her cheek, dropped down onto the console again without reaching her, and busied itself programming something into the co-ordinates panel. His other hand patted the console. 'Good girl. Didn't think she'd do it, but with the telepathic circuits under attack, I thought she'd respond if I could contact her.'

'The TARDIS rescued us?' Sarah remembered a pit in the Vatican, falling to certain death, only for the TARDIS to let her inside in the nick of time, back in Europa. 'Thank you,' she patted the console lightly as she whispered, feeling a bit silly for talking to a machine.

Did the ever-present hum in the background deepen slightly?

Blue/White. The sense of something vaster than the ocean: touching her mind, just for an instant. And gone.

'...message, and I'll have to place a beacon, as well.'

'Pardon?' Sarah turned her attention back to the Doctor, slapping the side of her head to clear it.

'It'll warn off anyone who might land. Hopefully until Gallifrey send someone to try to sort out the mess down there.'

He pressed a button on the console. 'Or they make the planet off limits.' If it were possible, his face looked longer than usual.

'What's wrong?' A stupid question, she thought, the moment she'd asked it. She knew how much he hated asking for help.

'Nothing,' he said, turning away from her abruptly. 'They'll cure or destroy it. They have to. Not even they would be stupid enough...'

'To use it for something?' Sarah finished for him.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

Head in the Sand

GARY RUSSELL

Charley stood in the corridor, but with one foot in the other room. And frowned.

It was odd. Everywhere she'd been in the TARDIS so far had possessed the same dark, wooden look, rather like a church or her finishing school in France. Yet this room was... well, something else entirely. She wanted to call it white, but it wasn't. Not quite. A sort of off-white but with a bit of grey and yellow depending on which way she looked at it. At the centre was something that looked similar to the big console she was familiar with, but different. It was the same dull gun-metal grey, with futuristic looking buttons and screens and was really rather scary. She felt at home with the levers and big Bakelite switches in the other room but these seemed more fanciful, and less... homely. There were even computer screens on it, she'd seen those on some of the places they'd visited, particularly on the Vanguard, but the Doctor had always been rather dismissive of them.

Taking a deep breath, she fully entered the room, noticing for the first time a huge set of double doors on the far side and the scanner screen set into the wall to the right of her.

'Well, this is rather rum, I must say.' She leaned over the console and flicked a couple of switches, but it was clearly inoperative. None of the little lights were alight, and the switches and levers just clicked when she activated them, rather than beeping or anything else she might have expected.

'Hello, Charley,' said the Doctor behind her.

She wheeled around 'Gosh, Doctor, you gave me quite a start there! What is this place?'

The Doctor frowned. 'Hmmm... that's interesting.'

'What's interesting?'

'This is,' he said, unhelpfully and walked back out.

Putting the strange room and the mysteries it might hold out of her

head, Charley scampered after the Doctor, sliding her arm through the crook of his, so that they resembled a couple of 'swells' on an evening stroll. He instantly rested his hand on hers, completing the image.

'Time is an interesting thing, isn't it Charley.'

'It is?'

'Oh yes. Like an unending river, it flows on immeasurably. And here we are, using the TARDIS to appear and disappear at will along its banks, dipping our toes into the water now and again, testing the temperature. If we like it, we paddle further. If we don't, we get out quickly.'

Charley resisted the temptation to point out that nine times out of ten, regardless of whether *she* liked it or not, they 'paddled'. Indeed, the Doctor waded in, swam about a bit and disturbed the fish more often than not.

Instead, she squeezed his arm tighter, rested her head on his shoulder and said quietly: 'And your point is?'

'My point is... is... well, my point is this. The TARDIS operates outside time and space while we're travelling. Therefore, it's rather hard for us to get out feet wet when we're not actually parked on the riverside. And yet...'

Charley waited, but they continued walking. Past the bedroom she used. Past the bedroom he rarely used. Past the library (reference rather than fiction). Past the Cloister Room she often found him relaxing in instead of his bedroom. Past the strange garage where the odd-looking motor car sat (he called it a beetle or something but he also called someone called 'johnpaulgeorgenringo' his beetle as well, so she didn't understand that).

Finally they reached the familiar console room, and she felt safer.

Eventually, however, Charley couldn't stop her curiosity from brimming over.

'Doctor, what exactly are you going on about?'

He looked startled at her question. 'Time, Charley. Time.'

She sighed. 'Yes, I know that. What *about* time?'

He opened his mouth to reply.

'And don't tell me that it's like a river,' she warned.

He closed his mouth.

A noise distracted them both. To the far right of the console room was a tiny enclave that contained a well, some shale and a wooden park bench. The Doctor called it his 'Not quite Zen garden'. It currently played host to a dinosaur. Sort of. Charley had been rather intrigued by all the recent (well recent to her anyway) discoveries of dinosaur bones and knew from her schooling that this creature resembled what had been named a pteradon. But it wasn't. It was larger for a start, about the size of a Shetland pony, and had once fitted both her and the Doctor on its back. It was jet black, had a long and very strong beak and frequently tried to fly around the TARDIS interior. It had difficulty doing that because it was actually rather sick and Charley had taken to ministering to its needs.

The Doctor wasn't keen on it however.

'Have you never had a pet, then?' she'd asked when first bringing Ramsey (as she had named it, in honour of the Prime Minister). He'd muttered something about once owning a dog, but Charley thought that was unlikely. He didn't seem a 'doggie' person. And one night, after he'd been infected with some poison from a couple of less than friendly man-like reptiles they'd encountered on Drakkis V, he'd got feverish and begun hunting the TARDIS for something called Wolsey. Charley thought this might have been another motor car but gathered when he calmed down that it was a cat he never actually owned. 'Benny owned that,' he explained later. As Benny was the name of a large teddy bear Charley owned back at home, the image this brought to mind meant she didn't ask any further questions.

Ramsey however was different. He wasn't a dinosaur; he was a vortisaur, a creature which normally lived in the wastes of the space/time vortex. The Doctor suggested that they weren't pleasant company because they ingested time, but Ramsey had been a model of good behaviour since coming aboard and Charley was determined to make him well again (assuming she could find out why he was ill) and persuade the Doctor to keep him rather than chucking him back into the vortex. After all, he was TARDIS-trained now, how would he fend for himself back in the wilds of the vortex if he was domesticated?

The Doctor tapped her shoulder. 'He's not tame, Charley,' as if

reading her thoughts. 'He's just docile because he's ill, and I think I know why.'

'You do?'

'Yes.' And with that the Doctor walked away, muttering to himself, tapping at dials and switches on the console. Charley was getting used to these abstract moments, but didn't want to push the subject of Ramsey. So she opted for a slight change of subject.

'So, that other room. A secondary console room?'

The Doctor stopped what he was doing and looked at her in surprise and joy. 'Very good, Charley. That's exactly what it is. Or was. It shouldn't be there, you see. I reconfigured the whole TARDIS a while back. When I first regenerated I flittered between the two, trying to work out which I was more comfortable with, and settled on this one. So I completely redesigned that one to look like this - but smaller.' He frowned.

'But if time is leaking back into here, that might explain why it has reverted, but according to the 'Old Girl herself, nothing's changed.'

The 'old girl' was the TARDIS itself. Whilst Charley accepted it was certainly alive in some weird way, she doubted it liked being called 'old'. Changing rooms was probably its way of nudging the Doctor to stop being so disparaging.

He was looking at Ramsey. 'I'm sure its his doing Charley. Having him aboard, in a state of temporal grace can't be healthy for him or us. Then, whenever we land, we re-enter normal time, which he must cause some damage to because he shouldn't be there and... and...'

Charley spotted a flaw. 'Ah, but if the TARDIS interior is in this state of temporal grace you're so fond of, how can Ramsey affect what's outside as he stays in here.'

'But that's the point, Charley. Don't you see? He feeds of time leakages. A small amount of local time seeps in whenever we land - just opening the doors does that. The longer we're around, the more gets in. So while we're out gallivanting, he's in here, munching on the TARDIS ambiance, causing no end of problems. Time reversal, my recent insomnia, the deterioration of the Volkswagen's tyres... it's all Ramsey's doing. Not his fault as such, but he is the cause.'

'How do you know?'

The Doctor looked at her. 'What other reason could there be? He's the only addition to the TARDIS and since he came aboard, these strange things have happened. There's no other explanation, I'm afraid.' He crossed over and put an arm around Charley's shoulders. 'I'm terribly sorry, I know you love him, but it's safer for us as well as him to take him home.'

Charley eased out from under the arm. She knew the Doctor was right, what other reason could there be for the strange occurrences, but it still saddened her. Daddy had never let her keep anything other than a tortoise at home, but Ramsey was in a class of his own.

As she knelt beside him, he nuzzled her and let out a soft 'caww', as if he knew what they'd been saying.

With a sigh, she moved away from him, and caught sight of her sweater. The arm that had been nuzzled was suddenly stained and worn, with a hole and loose threads. She frowned. It looked ten years older than the other sleeve.

And she looked Ramsey straight in the eye.

And if it was possible, she'd swear he was smiling at her. A smile that made her suddenly cold. Was she wrong? Was the affection she believed he offered her just a natural way of getting nourishment. Unconsciously, she held her sleeve tight, as if nursing a wound of her own.

All their troubles recently, it was Ramsey after all. It had to be.

After all, who else could it be?

Unless...

She glanced over at the Doctor, fiddling with the TARDIS again.

Unless it was someone else, someone who'd been travelling in the

TARDIS for so long now, he didn't know... didn't realise *he* was ill.

She glanced back at Ramsey and then the Doctor.

'One of them... but which one?'

And for the first time since she boarded the TARDIS a couple of weeks back, Charley Pollard felt very, very alone...

Raymond's Room

Keith R. A. DeCandido

Howdy, Igor. I'll have a beer. No, one of the big ones. Yeah, I know I ain't been in for a while. Been a little busy what with the wedding, the move, the gallery opening, and what all else.

Especially the what all else.

You gotta stop drinkin' your own merchandise, Igor, I told you about all this already. Well, some of it, leastaways. Mr. Lipinski's parents gave him the family house as a wedding present. The Victorian on Eaton just off Duval – the place with the turrets across from the Bottroff House. Right, *that* one.

Now Mr. Lipinski, he's dancin' a jig. This is the family house, he grew up here, everything's great. Ms. Lipinski, though, she isn't so thrilled. She has her own family house that she grew up in, after all, and this isn't it. But it *is* a wedding present, so she goes for it.

'Course, it made my job a little more complicated, what with them just back from the honeymoon and the opening and all. Still, the wedding was done, and the opening was more Ms. Osborne's problem than mine – that's Mr. Lipinski's agent – so I just focused on the move.

Hm? The opening? Hang on, I'll get to that. And get me another beer.

So we're digging some junk out of the turret that Mr. Lipinski's parents say we can get rid of. And we find Raymond.

No, Raymond's a doll. Ugliest damn thing you ever saw. It's supposed to be a little kid, but to be honest, it looks more like a monkey. Handmade, apparently. Mr. Lipinski's grandfather got it from a Bahamian housekeeper they had.

Hm? Oh funny, Cassie. This was back in the early 1900s, all right? Back then, servants didn't come down here to Key West from Georgia like I did, they came from the Bahamas. You gonna let me tell my story? Thank you.

So we find this doll. Thing's older'n spit, but it's in mighty fine shape.

Mr. Lipinski's happier'n a pig in shit. He got it from Dr. Lipinski when–

Hm? Oh, that's his Dad. Local doctor. So was his father. Whole family's doctors except for Mr. Lipinski. Poor guy hates needles, can't stand the sight of blood, and sucks at science. Nearly gave Dr. Lipinski a coronary when he said he was gonna become an artist, but hey, he done good at it.

So Dr. Lipinski gave him Raymond just like his Dad gave it to him. Family heirloom, and such-like. From what I've heard tell, Mr. Lipinski used to always blame stuff on the doll. You know, the usual kid stuff – 'Daddy, I didn't break the expensive vase, it was Raymond!' 'Mommy, I didn't take that candy, it was Raymond!' and so on. Now I don't think much of it, even though Mr. Lipinski spends near all his time with this doll like he's four years old again. Besides, I'm busy trying to integrate everything from Ms. Lipinski's old house and Mr. Lipinski's old house in a way that keeps 'em both happy. And it ain't easy keepin' an artist and a musician happy when it comes to interior decorating. Hell, Ms. Lipinski made us move her piano five times before she liked where it was.

Then Mr. Lipinski starts ordering furniture for the turret.

Me, I figured he was gonna use the turret for a studio or something. Gets some mighty fine light up there, and it's a good place to be solitary. Ceilings're a little low, but Mr. Lipinski isn't all that tall anyhow.

Instead, he sets up the studio downstairs, and says the turret's supposed to be Raymond's room.

Well, yeah, Cassie, I suppose it is cute, after a fashion. The problem, of course, was finding a full set of nice furnishings for a one-foot-tall doll – one of the fellas who works for the Wrecker's Museum found me someone. So now we had a whole room full of tiny furniture and that butt-ugly doll sitting in the middle of it.

Another beer, Igor. Thanks.

I don't think much of it, like I said, but then the weird stuff starts happening. One day, I'm throwing out the garbage, and I look up, and there's Raymond sitting in the turret window. Mighty creepy looking, I don't mind sayin'. I figured Mr. Lipinski probably put him on the windowsill.

Now mind you, there ain't nobody in the house except me and Ms.

Lipinski, and she's down in the kitchen. I go inside, get another bag, I go outside – and the doll ain't in the window. I figure I'm just seeing things.

But then that night, Brandy tells me – Hm? Brandy's the cook, Igor. And you never see her 'cause she don't drink.

Anyhow, she saw the same thing when she went out to tell some tourist that we weren't a bed-and-breakfast. And that was when the turret was locked.

Next day, an electrician comes to fix some wiring problems, and he swears that he hears noises from the turret when there was nobody up there.

Still, I don't think much of it, like I said. I'm not one for ghost stories – they can sell that to the tourists if they want, but I lived here thirty years and ain't never seen one.

So once-the Lipinskis're all nice and settled in and all the furniture's in and everyone's happy, Mr. Lipinski's spending all his time in the turret with the doll. All he talks about is Raymond. Whenever he talks to me, it's to make sure all of Raymond's stuff is all right. Hell, he even blamed Raymond for taking a couple missing light bulbs, like he was justifyin' somethin' to his Daddy all over again. All this with an opening in a week.

Hm? Yeah, yeah, I'm getting' to the opening. Another beer, Igor.

So the opening happens. Half the island shows up, like usual. Free food and booze, and no tourists – 'course people are gonna turn up.

Well, almost no tourists. There's these three Brits – well, two Brits, one Australian. Way overdressed – the guy's wearing pants and a sweater, for goodness sakes. Also had a stalk of celery on his lapel, which I only noticed 'cause he replaced it at one point with one of the stalks from my chopped vegetable plate. He starts hitting on Ms. Lipinski. The two women, they're asking everyone about Raymond. The Aussie starts talking to me. Easy on the eyes, but I'm actually working this thing, so I don't tell her much. Besides, something about her just rubs me the wrong way – too intense.

I talked with some folks afterward, and they were all a mite confused about those three. The two women were asking all kinds of questions, mostly about Mr. Lipinski and Raymond. I figured it's just a

bunch of tourists who managed to wrangle an invite, and we'd never see 'em again. Nobody else was telling them much beyond what we all knew – Mr. Lipinski was damned near obsessed with the doll, but that it wasn't a big deal. Hell, lotsa people thought Mel Fisher was crazier than that, and he was a local hero. 'Course, he actually found that gold he was lookin' for, too...

So then Ms. Lipinski walked up to me, introduced me to the guy – said he was just called 'the Doctor,' if you can believe that – and that he and his friends'd be coming to dinner the next night

Had to admit to being surprised at that. Didn't expect her to go for inviting some tourists over, but she said he was some kind of art expert or something. Didn't explain why his two girlfriends were asking about Raymond so much, but she's the boss, so I said the same thing I always do when she tells me to do something: 'Yes, ma'am.'

Couple other people came over, too, that night – mostly other artists from the island, wanting to see the new place. Brandy outdid herself, makin' her best conch fritters, some barbecued shrimp and scallops, and a big ol' salad. Turns out the Doctor knew all kinds of stuff about Mr. Lipinski's work, so the two of them spent the whole meal gabbing away about art. The Brit woman – her name was Nyssa – seemed a little shy, but the Aussie woman, Tegan Jovanka, was talking with Ms. Osborne.

After dinner, Ms. Lipinski invited everyone to stay a while. Some folks went out on the patio for drinks. Some others wanted to explore the house. I commenced to cleaning the dining room table and helping Brandy with the kitchen cleanup.

Ms. Jovanka and Ms. Osborne came down the stairs from the turret at one point. Ms. Jovanka looked like she'd seen a ghost. 'He was talking to it.'

'That's just Douglas,' Ms. Osborne said. 'He's an artist.'

I asked them what was wrong, but Ms. Osborne just muttered something about 'Douglas and his silly doll,' and went out onto the patio. Ms. Jovanka didn't go out with her, though. Instead, she looked at me.

'Glenn, how long has that doll been here?'

'Years. I think it was first brought to the house in 1904. It's been

packed in the turret since the forties or thereabouts. We dug it out 'bout four or five weeks ago – actually, it was the beginning of last month. Why?'

'Right when we got the signal in the TARDIS,' she muttered. 'And the D'r'w'shi are about that size...'

''Scuse me?'

'Nothing,' she said quickly, and then went out to the patio.

After that, Ms. Lipinski came in and asked for a bottle of port from the wine cellar. When I went down, I heard some kinda noise. I followed it, only to find the Doctor and Ms. Nyssa. The weird thing was what they were sayin' when I walked up to 'em – and the Doctor's funny outfit was all mussed up.

They clammed up right quick, but the Doctor was saying, 'Definitely a D'r'w'shi death trap. I was lucky to get out alive.'

'If that's true, Doctor, we need to make a move. That doll –'

'Hello Glenn,' the Doctor said to me, interrupting Ms. Nyssa.

'Everything all right?' I asked.

'Yes, just fine, Glenn, thank you. We were simply exploring the basement. Lovely architectural work here.'

He went on for about five minutes about the architecture of the building – got it completely right, too, which kinda surprised me – but didn't say anything about death traps. I figured he was just nuts and the sooner he was out of the house the better, so I led them back out of the basement, making something up about how the Lipinskis didn't like visitors down there.

I went to Mr. Lipinski in the turret after that. Something was funny about these three, and I thought Mr. Lipinski needed to know about it.

'No, Raymond,' he was saying, 'I can't do that, I have guests.'

So he was talking to the doll. Guess it wasn't that big a deal. Like Ms. Osborne said, he's an artist.

Another beer, Igor. Hell, give me a whiskey while you're at it. 'Course straight up! When do I ever put ice in hard liquor, Igor? Thank you.

So I get there, and Mr. Lipinski, he yells at me to get out, he's busy. I try to tell him what's going on, but he won't even listen.

I try to get Ms. Lipinski's attention; but she's busy entertaining folks

on the patio when I tell her I need to talk to her. She says it can wait.

So I went to the kitchen and asked Brandy if she knew anything about something called 'the D'r'w'shi' and why they might have death traps, and she didn't either. We figured those three folks were just weird, and went on about our business.

Guess I shoulda pushed harder given what happened. Yeah, it figures you didn't hear. Ms. Osborne did a pretty nice job of covering it all up.

No, Ms. Lipinski didn't visit a place up north. Not really, anyhow. Honestly, I can't say what did happen. Something trapped me and Brandy in the kitchen, and by the time we got out, Mr. Lipinski had locked himself in the turret and Ms. Lipinski was gone. We saw Ms. Osborne talking to the Doctor, Ms. Nyssa, and Ms. Jovanka, saying, 'I'll take care of everything. Doctor. Thank you.'

'Won't people notice Ms. Lipinski is – well, missing?' Ms. Nyssa asked.

'Like I said, I'll take care of it.'

'I just can't believe it wasn't the doll,' Ms. Jovanka said, 'I was sure...'

'Books and covers, Tegan, books and covers,' the Doctor said with a smile. 'The D'r'w'shi – or, rather "Ms. Lipinski" – fooled us all. Ah, Glenn and Brandy. I hope that H'w'k'nsian forcefield didn't put you out too much.'

I had no idea what the hell he was talking about and said so.

'Don't worry about it,' Ms. Osborne said before the Doctor could say anything. Then she told me about how Ms. Lipinski had gone off to visit relatives in the north and Mr. Lipinski had locked himself in the turret with Raymond and wouldn't come out.

Whaddaya mean, 'Is that it?' Yeah, that's it. The Doctor left, 'long with the other two – last I saw 'em, they were lookin' at some kinda phone booth or something.

Well, all right, there was one other thing. Mr. Lipinski, he finally came out of the turret after two days. Ms. Osborne took him off to some kinda party or other – tryin' to get him to be sociable again, I guess. Anyhow, I was doing some cleaning. Brandy had the night off, so I had the house to myself, and I heard a noise from the turret. I

went up, but Raymond was just sittin' there on the tiny couch I got for him. I figured I was hearing things, so I went back downstairs.

Then I heard the noise again, so I went up, and there was Raymond on the easy chair.

Yeah, that's what I said, and no, I didn't move him. That's when I decided that I hadn't had a day off in too long, m'self, so I locked up the house and came here.

Hell, I don't know what really happened. Something about those D'r'w'shi people. Me, I'm just doing my job.

Raymond? Only thing I know for sure about that is that I need me another beer. And another whiskey. Thanks, Igor. Cheers.

The Billion Year Heart

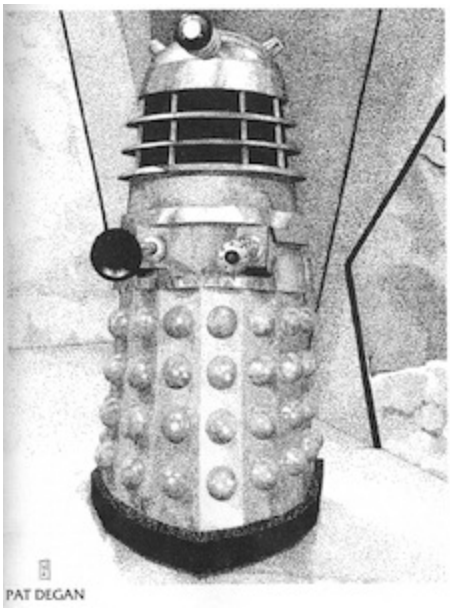
STEVE EMMERSON

They did not recklessly destroy me, like the others. But they dismantled me. Section by section, my polycarbide casing was wheeled away for analysis.

Then they began on the circuits: the delicate tracery of wires which constituted a neural system of such complexity that it was half constructed, and then half *grown* so that the exquisite cables became part of the living tissue at my core.

I became a magnet, drawing all attention. They poked me and tested me and I could do nothing but squat there and cringe in my absolute nakedness. The more they studied, the more confused they became. I was a perfect specimen, flawless in every respect, yet I had failed.

I was not the first, and, as I understood from the senses remaining to me, the trend had not ended with me.



The failure occurred on Chernos. The Dalek Supreme had launched a full-scale surprise offensive that resulted in the slaughter of the majority of the population. The few survivors scurried into their underground runs, which necessitated our action of flushing them out with extermination parties. I was a member of one of those parties.

The operation was simple. Go down and annihilate the natives. We could not risk a revolt at a later stage, so any potential resistance had to be crushed promptly. Chernos was of vital tactical importance in our campaign.

Down we went into the darkness, my sensors finding difficulty

navigating me through the earthy tunnels that had been excavated to accept the humanoid shape, and certainly not the intractable bulk of the Dalek. That, however, was a minor annoyance as our exterminators removed any troublesome obstacles.

The tunnels diverged the lower we went, so we split up. There was no danger in this strategy, as the Chernos lacked the sophistication of a reliable defence system. They relied on clubs and the wild suicidal tactics of the cornered beast. They were easily dealt with.

I picked up the trail of one of them, and eventually I could hear the terrified scrambling creature. I illuminated the area and caught sight of a shambling shape. It froze in the beam of light and I approached slowly, taking precise aim.

It was a female. A young specimen with lines of anxiety etched into her face. Her eyes gaped wide and her hands were drawn up in a futile shield. She was shaking and the breath came out of her in short, coarse bursts.

I waited, and the terror dissipated slowly from her eyes. She began to shift again into the depths of the burrow, but as she neared the edge of the wash of light, she stumbled and fell motionless at the screech of a Dalek gun. I spun to see another Dalek approaching me, the strands of its exterminator aperture retracting into their housing.

It spoke in a harsh and flat voice, although the words were absolutely unnecessary:

'You have failed. You will report immediately for systems examination.'

I trundled back up the path that had been smoothed into the earth by my descent. I reported to the ship.'

They dismantled me.

It was a flaw experienced by increasingly more Daleks on missions of annihilation. There must be some central fault, some design imperfection. The initial response of simply destroying the deviants was ineffective. They became so numerous that we were faced with either wiping ourselves out, or ceasing all operations until the fault was located and a repair determined.

But when they took me apart they found nothing. My systems

checked immaculately. I was, to the minutest degree, a perfect Dalek. In shooting tests I scored one hundred percent. In logic I was impeccable. In all things I was flawless. Yet the fact remained- *I had failed*.

The order came through for my disposal, and I accepted it without emotion. They prepared the high-voltage cables and approached my unprotected body.

I thought calmly about this hapless thing which was me. I constituted little without my shell. I could barely perceive the world around me. I could not move, nor communicate, nor indeed perform the most elementary biological functions. All I could do was *think*.

And in this state came the inspired answer. As death approached my silent, motionless body I remembered my reaction to the terrified, timid girl in the frightening burrow. I realised that there had been no misguided electrical message, no short-circuit in my weaponry structure. What I had in my fleeting and intimate moment with the girl facing extermination was a failure of a more basic nature.

A flash of conscience.

Disturbance At The Heron House

KEITH TOPPING

int. room. night.
caption.
1969
Establishment doesn't, necessarily, have to mean what you all think it means.

'Darling, I'm home.'

The scowling look on her face shattered his sitcom daydreams to mutated shards of glass that dug into his hands. He winced at the imagined searing pain, theorising that metaphors, like irregular fractions, are only as accurate as the person devising them.

Because it's only The Moment that matters...

A lie, no matter how good the intentions, or how well it is lived, is still, ultimately, cloaked in deceit.

No poetry. No soul.

Out of this boiling, fractured template of reality, there *must* come some truth.

'You're late,' Barbara Chesterton said flatly. 'Dinner's ruined...'

'I'm sorry,' replied Ian on auto-pilot, 'things are pretty much a madhouse at...' Please don't spank me mom, I was led astray by older boys... He let his words trail away when his wife's interest in them fell to the floor and was crushed beneath a grinding sharp heal of indifference. 'All I can do is apologise. Tomorrow, hopefully, I can be off really early. Would you...?'

Again, the silence.

Always, these days, the silence.

'I have to pick up Johnny from your mother's tomorrow,' Barbara snapped, and there the conversation ended - as dead as Christmas on December 27th.

Once more into the silence.

Ian looked around the cold, dark, impersonal front room of their home. Shuddered. Folded his copy of The Guardian neatly under his arm and headed for the spare room.

Ian Chesterton awoke shortly before dawn and, for a time, lay and stroked his memories.

It hadn't always been like this.

For a long time it hadn't been *anything* like this.

There had been suspicion and the odd pointed comment from family and (alleged) friends when they had returned from the place that they could never talk about to anyone but each other and the other believers. But they hadn't cared about that then. Basking, sunburnt and peeling in the glow of love they floated through the next three years on a cotton-wool cloud of kitten-soft reality.

Life had been bland, insipid.

Just the way they wanted it, cocooned in their little house. madly, truly, deeply in love. Living the lie.

The *necessary* lie.

The child had seen the changes come. When John was born Barbara seemed to be yanked back into the real world with all of the brutal force of a slap in the face. With a piece of lead piping. It had been a difficult birth and she had suffered postnatal depression for months and months afterwards, finding herself wandering, aimlessly around the house for days and hours at a time whilst Ian travelled the world with NASA, leaving her alone with the boy.

Breakfast was silent, as usual. Until something strange happened.

Barbara spoke.

'There was a problem at school yesterday,' she said.

Ian looked up from the morning paper, half a slice of toast still clamped hard between his teeth. 'Uuureeeyyy?' he asked, trying to both spit it out and swallow it at the same time.

'It's hard, you know... I mean, have you ever stood in front of a class of fourteen year old girls and asked them if they know what it's like on other planets whilst they just snigger and stare at their shoes?'

There was a hysteria in her voice.

Ian patted her hand soothingly. 'You didn't *have* to go back to teaching, you know...'

It was the wrong thing to say and he knew it as soon as the words had left his lips.

'Well, that's really *helpful,*' she screeched.

Ian paused. Took a sip of his tea. Straightened his tie. Stood And left.

It was a long time before he returned.

Ian once told Elizabeth Shaw a story about the TARDIS.

He said that shortly after he began to travel with the Doctor he had discovered a room in the TARDIS with a video machine. It was a model that must, Ian later speculated, have been made during the late 80s as only recently had Ian seen such a machine again. For long periods Ian refused to touch the video (once he had discovered what it was, that is), fearing that in some way his gaining knowledge of the future would unravel the complex fabric of time itself. The Doctor told him not to be so stupid, that Blinovitch's Limitation Effect would prevent time manipulation to any significant degree.

Time, the Doctor told him, looks after itself. Every simpleton knows *that.*

And so, during many long hours in the vortex between adventures, Ian sat alone in the room, ploughing diligently through the Doctor's collection. Most of the material was contemporaneous, Ian speculating that the Doctor possessed much of the archive material that was now lost by television companies. He also told Elizabeth that he would still experience an odd sensation of déjà vu occasionally when, upon watching a film or a television episode, he would suddenly remember where he had seen it before.

It was the Doctor's collection of science that most interested Ian, however. Hours of futuristic science-theory, spoon-fed to the inquisitive Chesterton-mind in an era when telecommunication, computer technology, the physics of space travel and robotics were new toys to play with. High technology perfectly suited to the excesses of the age.

Years later, when asked by Elizabeth where Ian had first developed

the idea of the Laser-enhanced Optical Density field, his greatest triumph, Ian had described watching an episode of Tomorrow's World in the TARDIS video room in 1964 which described the entire process. Elizabeth could only ask "what TARDIS video room?", a reply that became familiar to Ian every time he asked another of the Doctor's travelling companions about the room. Even his wife was ignorant of it, stating that she had assumed his long absences during journey's to be the product of someone who valued their privacy. 'We didn't want to disturb you,' Barbara said, recalling a conversation with the Doctor. 'He said you were "finding out about yourself".'

int. car.day.
caption.
1999.
'Are you sure you know where we're going?'

His fingers drummed on the steering wheel and a sigh escaped from his lips. He looked across with a tetchy smile that gently asked his wife if she wouldn't mind awfully shutting up and let him get on with the job in hand.

Getting lost.

'Sorry I spoke,' she muttered and returned her attention to the AA book. 'This is useless,' she continued. 'I've always said you should get a new map. The M25 wasn't even built when this was written.'

'Junction 23, past Box, then follow the signs to Zedbury,' he noted, slowing the car, opening the window with a twist of anger.

'We're going around in circles, Ian, aren't we?'

'We'll get there.'

'Eventually,' muttered Barbara Chesterton through gritted teeth. On their 10th wedding anniversary, she'd bought her husband a tiny plaque to hang over the mantelpiece of their home in Bath from a shop with the delightfully naughty name of Knobs and Knockers. "Why be difficult?" it asked, "when, with a bit of effort, you can be bloody impossible."

'I think we'll go left,' said Ian, starting the engine.

'All right,' she replied, and tried the radio to see if the buzz of static

had cleared yet. It hadn't. A pity, it meant missing Woman's Hour. Still, at least it also stopped Ian from drowning the car with Sibelius.

There were times when Barbara considered herself to be still hung over from the 60s. Caught with an angst that comes from being raised in a liberal environment. She was taught at an early age to care passionately. And she still did. She cared about leaded petrol and nuclear weapons, irradiation and the ozone layer and everything else that middle-aged, middle-class, middle-everything people care about. Occasionally, like last night watching Globelink for one of Damien Day's heart-breaking reports from Romania (or was it Yugoslavia?), she'd catch herself crying for the world she'd escaped from and then returned to.

This hollow world.

'I always feel,' she said, between bites on a ham and cheese sandwich, 'that Victorian architecture was a reflection of their optimism rather than their taste.'

Ian nodded slowly in agreement. 'That's why Johnny bought it,' he said. 'It's a Godforsaken place.' An interesting turn of phrase that. There is a belief in Celtic mythology that the Godforsaken are actually the blessed. They just don't know it yet. 'I joined the Labour party to see places like this wiped out,' he said sadly.

'That was a long time ago, darling,' said Barbara.

He turned and gave her a watery smile that said a million things about nothing. 'A lot of things were. Racism, inequality, homelessness. They all still exist.'

Once upon a time Ian Chesterton, NASA-guru, space-pundit, a man once dubbed by the Sunday Times as "the people's scientist", had read, to the point of overdose, science-fiction. Nasty, horrid, trainspotter 'sci-fi' of the kind that the general public sniggers and spits at. This was long ago, of course, back in the days when space-monster fixations were part of a bigger, greater new-realism. Comic-strip, pop-art, gaudy, dayglo colours which moved in the spirit of the age. In those days people didn't laugh at science-fiction, just as they didn't laugh at flares, and star jumpers, and *The Persuaders* and Derby County and 'love, peace and harmony'. But the world grew up and Ian

left behind his secret passion.

Except that he didn't. Instead, he took his collection of *Justice League of America* and *The Brave and the Bold* and *Silver Surfer*, his pulp Michael Moorcock collection, and his ITC film series novels and put then in a large cardboard box in the attic. And when, every six months or so, the spirit moved him sufficiently, he would climb up into the dusty loft and sit for several hours indulging himself in them all over again.

Self-consciously hidden away from the real world, the world in which rationality gives people no time for trivia, Ian Chesterton dreamed again.

Because dreaming is, after all, free.

'I was thinking the other day about when you left me,' Barbara said suddenly. It was the first time in almost thirty years that she'd mentioned it.

'Why, for goodness sake?' asked Ian, a thin (almost emaciated) smile on his lips.

'I don't know,' Barbara said, truthfully. 'You know what it's like, some bit of rubbish floating around in your mind can get triggered by... I don't know, some fragment of a song on the radio, or a scrap of nonsense in the newspaper. Well, anyway, I...' She paused and looked across at Ian who was pulling the car into a siding in the road. 'You never told me why you came back.'

'Didn't I?' asked Ian.

'No.'

'Then why didn't you ask?'

'I didn't like to,' said Barbara with an embarrassed glance away from her husband. 'It seemed wrong somehow...'

Ian thought about this for a moment. 'Do you want to ask me now, then?'

'Yes,' said Barbara after an agonising pause. 'I really would.'

'Okay then...'

Silence. But only for a moment

'Why did you come back?'

Ian removed his seat belt. Straightened his tie and opened the car

door. Then he looked at her. Deep into her hazel eyes. 'I came back,' he said, 'because I couldn't live without you. I mean, who else could I talk to about being to other worlds?'

Fate Healer

JON DE BURGH MILLER

The small, stone room is cold, my eyes are filled with tears, and I've never felt so sad. My eyes are filled with tears, and I feel that I cannot go on much longer. My eyes are filled with tears, but I know it's going to be all right. Because the Doctor is holding my hand in his. He's looking at me sympathetically. He's comforting me through my distress. I can see from the ferocity in his eyes that he is going to do everything he can to help me. With complete disregard for his own well being.

A guard enters the cell, and tells the Doctor to leave me. I wipe my tears on my sleeve, and thank the Doctor for his kindness. Without saying a word, he looks me in the eyes as if trying to ascertain whether I'll be all right. He smiles slightly, and stands up. Placing his straw hat on his head, he says goodbye and leaves. I stare out of my one small window, and look out on the pain and suffering of the camp around me. I'm alone once more, a political prisoner with no political influence. And now I must wait, pray and hope. Somehow, the Doctor will, no, must, sort things out. He says he will, he says he always does. And for some reason, I trust him.

I open up my diary - well, it's not really a diary, more a few old bread cloths I've managed to get the man who guards my cell to give me. But at least I can scribble in it with the splinters of charred wood from the floor of the sealed wagon that contains my cell. I look back on the events of the past few months, and I wonder how things could ever have got this bad. Then I turn to yesterday, and look at what happened since the Doctor was put in the cell with me. For the first time, I see hope in my words. I need to believe there is a chance things will turn out well. I need to believe.

Ace stood on a vast, golden desert plain, staring out at the most spectacular sunset she had ever seen.

'It's beautiful, Professor.'

The Doctor smiled, and tilted his hat down slightly to shield his eyes from the glare. 'It's the finest sunset this planet will ever have while humans are the dominant species.

Ace turned to look at her friend. 'Thanks for showing me this. I never realised how different things were 800 years before pollution.'

'Yes.' The Doctor placed his arm on her shoulder, and pointed to the dust shrouded outline of a city at the base of a distant mountain range. 'That,' he said, 'is the great city of Antioch. If we're going to solve this mystery, then that place holds our best hope for clues.'

Ace looked back at the TARDIS, then looked forward towards the mountains. She shook her head at the crazy way events were turning out today. Just this morning she had been sitting in the cafe at the British Museum, eating a Cornish pasty, when the Doctor had rushed up to tell her that he'd found something strange in one of the restricted archives. Apparently, the Doctor had been rooting around the museum archives when he had discovered an amulet dating from 1098. The amulet had an inscription on it, which stated that it had been produced to give thanks from the people of Antioch to the Great Dragon, along with a picture of a mythical lizard. But everyone knew there was no such thing as dragons, especially in the tenth century. So here they were, 900 years earlier, a mile south of the city of Antioch, determined to find out what the source of that little anachronism was. Ace wondered what the Doctor was planning to do. Walk up to the natives and ask if they had seen any dragons kicking around?

Count Eustace of Boulogne knelt down beside a rock, on a peak overlooking the stricken city, and wept. What sins had his people committed to be treated this way? He had told his armies that all their struggles would be worth it, because at the end of it all they would arrive in a glorious land of milk and honey, a new nexus for all Christendom. Despite being only thirty-five, nowhere near as old as some of the other leaders on the expedition, they still respected and believed him. But as the days grew longer, food supplies dwindled and tempers shortened, he knew that even if they got to Jerusalem, all they would find would be a dilapidated city run down from years of Muslim

carelessness.

'Eustace,' a soothing voice said. He looked up to see Godfrey's familiar, white bearded face.

'Hello Brother. I... I've been praying about the future.'

'As have I,' Godfrey replied with sobriety.

'We will never win, will we?'

Godfrey paused, and pointed towards the city. 'Never say that, my friend. Antioch will belong to Christendom before the month is out. No matter what Satan may wish.'

'No,' Eustace said angrily. 'Not Antioch, I mean this whole damn escapade. We've lost so many good, beautiful people. So much time, so much blood. And for what? A few stone encampments in the middle of the desert?'

Godfrey breathed a sigh of despair. 'Get up child. Don't you think we all wonder that? We all know that there is no perfect land. We all know that even if Antioch falls, mere days at Jerusalem could see the end of all our armies.'

Eustace could see Godfrey trying to force a slight smile, but he knew from the pain in the old man's eyes that he was not completely confident in his words. 'Godfrey? Do you think we should turn back?'

Godfrey coughed and shook his head. 'Not at all. The troops believe that all this suffering is for a reason. They believe that after death, eternal salvation in the heavenly Jerusalem will be theirs. The more they suffer, the larger their reward in the afterlife.'

'Godfrey?' Eustace looked up expectantly at his older brother. 'Is there an afterlife?'

Godfrey's face was still, and a glazed look crossed his eyes. 'There has to be, brother, there has to be.'

The sound of a distant sandstorm whistled in Ace's ears as she looked around the dusty, golden plains on which the long ring of seventy motionless, canopied carts lay, each one laden with people and drawn by weary horses and camels. The caravan wound its way around the walls of Antioch, the mystical looking city that towered above them. Composed of tall buildings of a uniquely Middle Eastern architecture that reminded Ace of the Notting Hill Muslim temple she'd once been

taken to on a school trip, the city was beautiful, but at the same time had an extremely eerie feel to it. Below its walls, the camp sat waiting, as if expecting the mountains behind the city to give forth something magical to them. Makeshift tents with dirty canvas sheets covering them had been erected all around the carts. About two yards high, the structures were clearly showing their age, and creaked and moaned in the wind.

'So who are these lot, Doctor?' Ace asked.

The Doctor looked incredibly sombre. 'They're what the people of your time refer to as crusaders. Europeans who have left behind their property and family in the West in order to secure the Holy Land for Christendom. Patriots, religious fundamentalists, murderers and saints. They're all here. And sometimes all in the same person.'

'So what are they doing camped outside that place?' she said, pointing to the city.

'Antioch,' the Doctor said grandly, 'was known to the crusaders as the key to the Holy Land. At this point in time it is one of the grandest cities on the planet. For almost a year now, the crusaders have been besieging the city, with little success.'

Ace looked around at the distant crowds and shook her head. 'But why Doctor? Why are so many of them still here, just camped outside the city. If they haven't won yet then surely they never will?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Quite the opposite in fact. You must remember that they've survived eleven months under these horrendous conditions. Little food, little water, torrential storms, freezing nights and days in the burning sun. The will power from the knowledge that they've survived so far keeps them going indefinitely.'

'But how do they keep up hope?'

The Doctor looked her in the eyes and uttered one word. 'Faith.'

While the caravans surrounded the city, they were all about a hundred yards away from the actual walls. Throughout the middle of the crusader camp, leading right up to the main gates of Antioch, was a street-like passageway lined with wooden merchant stalls, each covered by a dusty brown canopy sheet. The Doctor and Ace walked up to one of the stalls where a wizened old man sat delicately painting some ceramic pots.

'Talk about a terracotta army, professor!' Ace said

'Yes,' the Doctor said, with his eyes tilted downwards in the thoughtful way that told Ace he was contemplating something. The Doctor reached down for one of the pots and the man behind the stall grunted in alarm.

'May I have a look?' the Doctor asked.

The old man tilted his head and looked curiously at the Doctor.

'Please?'

Ace tugged at the Doctor's jacket. 'Professor, I think he's puzzled by our clothes.'

'Ah yes,' said the Doctor, smiling. He pointed at himself and stared at the man. 'We have travelled from Egypt, and have acquired these exotic cloths along the way.'

The old man smiled, his curiosity satisfied. He held out a brightly decorated vase for the Doctor to peruse.

'Thank you,' acknowledged the Doctor. 'Now this is interesting,' he said, taking the vase from the man and turning it over in his hands. He held the vase out for Ace to take, which she did. He drew his finger along a wavy line, which ran across the surface of the vase.

'You see this, Ace?'

'Wavy line,' she nodded. 'What's special about it?'

'Nothing,' the Doctor said. 'But look at the end of the line.' He moved the vase round in Ace's arms until she saw that the line terminated in a strange, animal like shape.

'If I may ask,' the Doctor said to the old man, 'what does that depict?'

The man spoke for the first time. 'That is the menace that haunts our nights. That is the cause of all that is wrong with this siege.' The man paused, as if for dramatic effect. 'That, is the dragon.'

A look of concern crossed the Doctor's face and he quickly handed the vase back to its seller.

It was dark by the time Eustace and Godfrey got back to the camp. Dark and cold.

A lone vassal was standing guard outside Godfrey's tent. When he saw that the Duke had returned, he ran up to him and began helping

the old man towards the tent. 'My lord Godfrey,' the vassal said, 'we were concerned by your absence.'

Godfrey sighed. 'Why is it that I can't go anywhere without my men obsessing over my health.' He coughed and shook his head. 'I'll be fine.'

Godfrey shooed the man away, and staggered off into his tent, passing through the canvas drape that led to his chamber.

'Do not worry, friend,' Eustace assured the vassal. 'He is strong. He is resilient. He's the famous Godfrey de Bouillon.'

The vassal nodded, then cleared his throat. 'Erm, sir, a man came by today wanting to see you.'

Eustace looked at the vassal and felt surprised. He never usually got any visitors. Who could possibly be so important that they hadn't been able to be despatched by one of his underlings?

'Who is this man?' Eustace asked.

'He calls himself the Doctor. But he claims to be an ambassador from Byzantium. He knows things no-one but the Emperor should be aware of, so we can't dispute his claims.'

Eustace ran his fingers through his hair in despair. 'Why did I ever swear that oath to you, Alexius,' he said under his breath. 'Why?'

Eustace reached behind him as a couple of his servants removed his armour. There had been no fighting today, but Eustace still felt more secure wearing a basic chest plate when walking around the camp. The treachery the last few months had shown that it was not wise for a nobleman to wander around the camp unprotected.

'Where is this Doctor?' he asked.

'In the barracks with a young lady who is accompanying him on his journeys.'

Eustace suddenly felt a feeling of dread sweep over him. 'You don't mean my barracks, do you, boy?'

The vassal looked confused. 'Why yes sir. With Arlotta.'

Eustace couldn't believe this. 'What? What do you mean?'

'Er,' the vassal stammered, 'Captain Francois thought it best under the circumstances.'

Eustace wasn't sure whether he was angry or scared by this piece of

news. The diplomatic repercussions could be severe if this man really was an ambassador from Alexius. What kind of prince put his patron's ambassadors in a prison cell? The rumours said that Alexius was planning on making a visit to the crusading front lines soon, so a preparatory ambassador visit was not entirely unexpected. Hopefully if Alexius did arrive he would understand that at this late, desperate stage of the campaign for Antioch they had to lock up strangers until they knew for sure that they were not spies for the Muslim kings. But more than that, this vassal had locked the Doctor-up with Arlotta. Eustace wanted to be angry, but realised that it was too late to do any good.

Arlotta was the Frankish princess who had betrayed the Christians to the Muslims at Edessa. Held prisoner in Eustace's stone barracks cart, she was only kept alive because of her famous guile. She knew how the Muslims' thought, and Eustace was sure that one day that skill would be immeasurably useful. Nobody trusted her, but she kept claiming that she had been mistakenly accused, that she was actually trying to spy on the Muslims rather than betray the Christians to them. Eustace hoped that she was telling the truth, and deep down he felt a part of him believed that. And so he had told the others that she had been killed, while he secretly kept the spy alive inside his barracks. She was useful, but she could never exist outside the prison walls. If the Doctor reported back to Alexius that Arlotta was being held rather than killed, then Eustace's career and reputation would be over.

'Tell me, young man,' Eustace asked. 'What do you make of this "Doctor"?'

The vassal looked bemused, then rolled his eyes upwards as if searching his mind for the correct words. 'Well sir, he's a curious type. Very strangely attired.'

'He's an ambassador, of course he's strangely attired.'

'He seemed to be impressed by our work here, but didn't want to talk to anyone but you or one of the other nobles.'

Eustace nodded. That made sense. If Alexius really was on his way to the Holy Land, then his ambassador would not want to waste time dealing with knights and vassals.

'Oh and one more thing,' the vassal said, obviously having just

remembered some small detail, 'he mentioned that he knows about the dragon, and that if we help him, he knows how to defeat it.'

Well this was a turn up for the books. Ever since they had first arrived at Antioch, there had been stories of a great flying beast swooping down into the city to provide supplies and food to the city's inhabitants that otherwise couldn't get past the knights' blockade. Few people had ever seen the beast, but the priest Adhemar's raving warnings meant that most in the camp believed in its existence. In the last couple of weeks however, stories had spread that the dragon was attacking the Christian camp itself. Eustace had been sceptical. He hadn't wanted to believe. They had been so close to breaking the will of the people of Antioch. So close to taking the city. If word spread that what little supplies they had were being taken by a giant lizard from the sky, morale would be destroyed. The thought that a stranger from Byzantium might turn up with a solution to the problem, well that was plainly ridiculous.

'Fetch the Doctor,' said Eustace. 'I'm looking forward to talking to him already.'

The fire from the tree branch Ace had made into a torch flickered in the cold, Antioch night. She pulled her jacket close to her body, hoping that she wouldn't freeze to death out here. She looked over at her companions, and marvelled at their resilience to go through things like this every single day. With the incredible way he could get round authority figures, the Doctor had managed to persuade Eustace to lend him three soldiers to accompany their journey up into the barren, stone mountains, where the dragon's nest allegedly lay.

'So how much further is it, tin face?' she asked one of the knights.

'I am unsure my lady. We see the dragon in the shadows, but never know exactly where its cave lies.'

Ace couldn't believe the way that these people so blindly accepted that a mythical monster could suddenly turn up and start attacking them. 'So then, why hasn't anyone made an attempt to stop this thing?'

'None of us are that suicidal,' the knight told her, obviously bewildered at such bravery coming from a woman. 'The dragon is clearly a sign from Satan. The best way to defeat the devil is to have

faith, trust in our Lord, and keep on fighting for the glory of Christendom, as we have been ever since the declaration of our Lord's great quest.'

Ace shook her head in bewilderment. 'Well I tell you what, mister. You keep praying, and I'll do the fighting. There's no such thing as an-undefeatable monster in my book.'

She glanced at the Doctor who was smugly grinning at her attempts to reason with tenth century logic. She shot him a look of mock anger. 'Well, none that will affect you, anyway.'

After half an hour Ace had learned much about the trials the crusaders had so far endured, but the conversation ended as they reached the opening in the mountain from which the alleged dragon was meant to emerge.

'Right then,' said the Doctor, 'I'll go in first to see what all the fuss is about. You wait out here.'

Ace wasn't having any of this. 'I'm coming too, Professor,' she said cheerily.

The Doctor turned sharply and gave her an intense look, which told her that he wasn't having any arguments. 'No,' he said. 'Wait for me here. I'll be out in a few minutes.'

So they waited. And waited. And waited.

After twenty minutes had passed, Ace turned to the knights and made an announcement. 'I'm going in, OK. You three stay out here.'

The knights protested but Ace assured them that she would be careful. She took a large, pointed shield from one of them, strapped it round her left arm, then ventured into the cave.

She looked around to get her bearings and lifted her fire torch towards the walls in order to see her way forward. Like most of the rock around Antioch, this cave appeared to be made of a dry yellowing stone which looked like it had been untouched for millions of years. Ace was grateful to see that the cave was a narrow passageway down into the mountain. She had been concerned that she might find a maze of tunnels and never be able to get out, but this way locating the Doctor shouldn't prove too much of a problem. After several minutes, the tunnel opened out into a large cavern, with a ceiling so high she could see nothing but darkness above her. She sniffed the air, and was sure

it smelled of rotting meat. She listened carefully and could hear the sound of bats fluttering above. Maybe the Doctor had found a secret alcove overhead, and had disturbed the creature.

'Doctor?' she called, but there was no response. She ventured further into the cavern, took a deep breath and looked up once more.

Suddenly there was a rush of air as something heavy swooped past her head. She lifted the torch up but all she was able to see was a flash of something brown and leathery. This must be it, she thought. This must be the dragon. Either that or a flying cow.

'Where's the Doctor then?' she called up into the unknown space above. 'I'll kill you if he's hurt.'

She felt the hairs on the back of her neck and arms standing on end with fear as she realised that there was a distinct possibility that this creature might have killed the Doctor.

'If you've harmed him, fish skin,' she called, 'then I'll kill you right here. I swear.'

There seemed to be no further sign of the dragon. She had to get it to fly down to her level. She had to find out quite where it was going. The dragon could fly, and its nest was obviously too high for her to get to, but the same would be true for the Doctor. He had found a way to get up there, and now she needed to as well.

'Oh no,' she muttered, this time to no-one but herself. Maybe the dragon had killed the Doctor and had taken his remains up to its nest itself? She glanced around at the floor. There didn't seem to be any sign of a struggle. There was only one thing for it. She had to somehow get the dragon to come down to her. Only then could she learn what had happened to the Doctor.

'Come and get me lizard features,' she called.

The noise of the bats stopped. Ace realized that the cavern was now silent. She could hear nothing but the sound of her rapidly beating heart and her steady breathing.

Suddenly there was a rush of air and Ace gasped as she was knocked to the floor. She stood up and was about to attack when a rush of pain seared through her. She dropped the torch, but not before noticing that something had ripped into the flesh of her stomach.

Ace reached for the torch and as she did so briefly caught sight of

her attackers face. It was a dragon all right. Brown, scaly, and with piercing yellow eyes. Everything that Hollywood had taught her about the beasts, and more.

Ace yelped as the dragon's head slammed into her. She felt the weight of its head clamp down on her leg and gasped in agony as its razor sharp teeth ripped into her flesh. She threw her body weight away from the beast, realising that despite not having found the Doctor, she had to get away or she would almost certainly be history. Doing her best to ignore the pain that filled her body, she rolled onto the floor and felt the earth shake as the beast's foot narrowly missed her. Regaining her balance, she lifted up her heavy, round shield so that it hid her face from the monster.

She slowly edged towards the shaft of light that indicated the exit to the cave, and gritted her teeth as she felt the blast of air against the shield. The dragon was breathing fire at her, and the shield would only be able to withstand the heat for a small amount of time. She felt her pulse racing and blinked rapidly to get the sweat out of her eyes. The light was dim and much of her awareness of her surroundings came from the intermittent illumination from the dragon's fire.

She threw herself in a mad run towards the opening. It was now or never. Suddenly there was an enormous scream from the dragon and Ace felt a heavy, snake like object whip around her feet, knocking her to the floor. The dragon ran into her, but she ducked before it could touch her. The creature was now blocking the path out of the cavern, and Ace realized that she was staring it in the eyes. Was its expression one of smugness or curiosity? She couldn't tell. All she knew was that she was trapped.

The dragon slowly moved forward, its forked tongue flickering eagerly. Ace froze, and the creature lifted a scaly talon. At first Ace thought that it was going to stroke her, but then she saw that the talon was raised at a cutting angle. The dragon breathed a small puff of flame and the light shone off the edge of the talon. It was going to strike. Ace closed her eyes tightly, and tensed up as the dragon slammed its talon down towards her.

'Andrak!' a voice cried. 'Stop!'

The dragon froze, and looked towards the source of the voice.

There, standing in the light of the tunnel, was the Doctor. Ace had never been so glad to see her friend.

'Witch man,' the dragon hissed, with the nearest to speech that a dragon was capable of.

'Andrak! Leave her alone!'

With a deafening noise that would haunt Ace for years to come, the creature roared defiantly, turned its head and breathed out a huge ball of fire.

Ace realized that she had had her eyes tightly shut. She opened them and saw that the dragon had backed away, and was now staring into the beam of the pocket torch that the Doctor was shining into the cave. It was staring intensely at the Doctor, its eyes glowing a feint red, pupils shrinking in the light.

'Prey,' it hissed.

'No Andrak. Ace is a friend of mine. You can't kill her.'

The dragon's head suddenly flicked back to look at Ace, making her jump. 'Go,' it said.

Ace let out a deep breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding and cautiously moved around the dragon to where the Doctor was, being careful not to make any sudden moves.

'Now,' said the Doctor. 'Return to your nest, and let us leave.'

The dragon growled angrily, then with lightning fast agility, darted upwards, into the darkness.

Ten minutes later, the Doctor, Ace and Eustace's knights sat in the wagon which the Doctor had borrowed for their journey to the mountains. Ace had stared at her wounds, and been relieved to realize that they were little more than minor cuts. Nothing a bandage or two wouldn't cure. She had decided to quiz the Doctor on just how he had got out of the dragon's nest alive, and eventually he relented to her enquiries.

'The dragon is one of the last survivors of an alien race,' he said. 'They are the Andrak. Hundreds of years ago, they came to Earth intending to make this planet their own. Their reign of tyranny and fear swept across this area, the locals believing the monsters had been sent from the heavens to judge them for their crimes. They began

throwing their power around slightly too much, and before long humanity's fear of them had caused an uprising of young men determined to destroy the Andrak forever. Much blood was shed, but eventually all the Andrak were killed. All except for our friend in the cave, it seems.'

'So why is this one still here?' Ace wondered.

'This one,' the Doctor continued, 'was a dissenter. An outcast from his clan. He opposed the doctrine of conquest his people followed, he realised that this planet's natives were sentient, not just brainless animals to be crushed, and he refused to co-operate in their oppression of humanity. He was cast out, and fled to the caves near the city where he has lived to this day.

'For years now the people of Antioch have, I assume out of fear for their lives, provided food and protection for the Andrak. In return, he kept the city safe from attack. Realising that the crusaders posed a threat, he had done his best to protect the city, but he's an old dragon now, and his power is weak. As soon as I caught sight of the pigmentation on his body, I realised what he was, and began to communicate in an ancient Andrak tongue. He knew of me through legend, and when I showed him the amulet, an object he held safely in his cave, he realized that I told the truth when I said that the tide of history was against him, and that further attacks on the crusaders would eventually lead to his death.'

The wagon trundled along swiftly, until the horse pulling it dared to go no further. They got out, and Ace pointed to a rapidly expanding cloud of smoke growing from within the crusader camp.

'Gordon Bennett,' Ace said. 'What's happened?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor, with a look of fear across his eyes unlike any other Ace had ever seen.

As they got to the camp, the Doctor and Ace were appalled to see that violence had apparently broken out all over the place. Several wooden siege machines and catapults were bombarding the ash-darkened, rain filled sky above. At first it was not clear what they were attacking, but then Ace saw the graceful yet enormous silhouette of the dragon. The beast was moving swiftly, and looked like it was

desperately trying to avoid the rain of arrows bombarding him.

Ace looked at the Doctor disapprovingly. 'I thought you'd convinced the dragon to stop attacking people.'

'I had,' the Doctor said, 'but I fear that our words of encouragement to the knights were taken slightly too seriously.'

The Doctor saw Eustace standing proudly watching his men. The vassals by the side of the prince were eagerly preparing the Count with a leather crossbow holder.

'Stop!' the Doctor yelled, running up to Eustace.

One of the guards grabbed the Doctor by the arms so that he could not get any closer to the prince.

'Stop this madness, Eustace!'

The prince looked up. 'Doctor! We thought the dragon had killed you.'

'No,' the Time Lord said angrily. 'On the contrary. The dragon agreed to stop its attacks.'

Eustace shook his head. 'That can't be! It landed in our camp, so we took your advice Doctor. No longer will we be scared of Satan's demons! We made the first strike, and now the monster is nearly defeated.'

'You must understand,' the Doctor shouted over the din of flames and battle shouts, 'it must have been trying to apologize. To make peace. End this carnage. Now!'

Eustace stared with bewilderment as he took in what the man was saying. He pointed to the Doctor, and looked at the knights ejp had accompanied him and Ace on the journey to the dragon's cave. 'Are his words true?' he asked. 'Has the dragon really made peace?'

'Sir,' one of the soldiers said, 'we did not see the actual exchange during which the promise may have been made, but both the Doctor and his companion escaped, despite the woman suffering several flesh wounds.'

Eustace paused, then quickly shouted an order to his generals. 'Cease fire! Now!'

The fighting stopped, and the Doctor and Ace watched as the dragon swooped down, skidding to a halt on the ground.

'Forgive them, Andrak!' the Doctor screamed at the creature. 'They

didn't know.'

'I leave now!' the dragon said with a roar loud enough for the Doctor to hear. It turned its head and let out an enormous roar. Eustace's men backed away, and several of them raised their crossbows with terror, but Eustace held his arm out to tell them to stop. The dragon stretched its legs, flapped its leathery wings then flew up into the sky. The knights watched in awe as the creature disappeared.

'Where will you go?' the Doctor called after it, but the dragon was too far away to hear the man's words. The Doctor smiled, realising that the last of the Andrak would soon find a new resting place to spend the short while left before it died living peacefully, away from the fear and superstition that had plagued him since humanity's genocidal attacks on his people.

Eustace turned to look at the Doctor. 'The dragon really is gone now?' he asked hopefully.

'Yes,' the Doctor said with a hint of sadness in his voice. 'Gone forever.'

Eustace's mouth turned slightly, as if he was about to smile. 'We're going to do it now, aren't we?' he said. 'We're going to finally take Antioch.' The Count looked around as if he could not quite believe that things were finally going his way. 'Doctor,' he said, 'is there anything we can do to repay you?'

The Doctor cocked his head up and looked at Eustace with intrigue in his eyes. 'Actually there is,' the Time Lord said. 'Correct the injustice that has plagued your mind for months. Set free your prisoner.'

Eustace looked at the Doctor with fear in his eyes, but could tell from the way the Count was reacting to the intense stare the Doctor was giving him that he would do as benefactor had asked.

A soft whispering voice wakes me from a dream of dragons and fire and pain and anguish. I open my eyes and see the Doctor's soft face looking at me. I've never known anyone who could make a woman feel so at ease simply by looking at her.

'It is done,' he says, and I suddenly notice the weariness in his tired, lined face. His clothes are dirty and torn, and scratches mark his cheeks. Yet the only emotion on his face is one of relief

'Did we win?' I ask. The same question I've been asking every day for months. Every day I live for the moment when Eustace or one of his knights will come with some news, and for a brief fleeting moment there exists the possibility that we might have won, and that I might be set free. And every day, before I even ask the question, I see the look in their eyes, which lets me know what the answer will be. My instincts don't let me down today, and I know what the Doctor is going to say.

'We did it, Arlotta. We won.'

My breathing changes, and I gasp for air. I'm in shock, and elated at the possibility that it might all be over. Once more tears fill my eyes, but this time there is no sadness. I look through the mist at my small, arrow thin window and stare out at the camp outside. Many of the tents are burning, but the fires appear to be under control. I listen carefully and I'm sure I can hear some soldiers singing in the distance. Singing with happiness Something that I haven't heard for a long while.

'I must go now.' the Doctor says, matter of factly. 'I'm sorry, I've already stayed far too long here. I'm already too involved.'

'Oh please,' I beg him, 'please stay. You've helped us more than we can ever repay you.'

'It wasn't just me. Eustace admitted he was wrong. It takes a lot for a man to do that.'

'Please Doctor.'

The Doctor smiles, then takes out a round metal object from his coat. He looks at it, then thrusts it back into the pocket. 'All right,' he says, as he helps me up from my bed. 'I'll stay, just for tonight. Can you walk?'

I nod my head, and the Doctor loops his arm around mine. I look around nervously, and feel strangely empty when I see that my guard is nowhere to be seen.

The Doctor helps me through the door and we walk off, arm in arm, towards the future.

Shadows Cast

MIKE MORRIS

When Catherine woke it was dark. The first thing she felt was pain. Pain and... dust.

'Hello?'

Her voice wasn't working properly. It was cracked, broken. Her right arm wouldn't move even though she could feel it, lying across her stomach. She tried to sit up but something was holding her down. Something big, heavy.

Where am I?

'Hello?'

Walking along the High Street, she'd been...

'Hello? Is there anybody there?'

It had been overcast, about to rain, and -

'Hello?'

Explosion.

From nowhere. She remembered glass and noise. Rubble - whirl of dust, biting into her, and then... then shadow.

'Help? Help me!' She swallowed, her mouth rough, 'I'm trapped! Is there anybody there?'

Sleep.

Awake.

'Hello?'

Catherine couldn't move. Small, sharp stones bit into her back. Her head hurt.

'Can anybody hear me?'

And then she heard it. A voice, not hers. It seemed to come from above her.

'Hello?' it said, very quietly.

She felt a surge of excitement. 'Hi... er, hello. I'm...' Calm. 'My name

is Catherine. I'm trapped down here, I can't move. There's something lying across my waist. Can you help me?'

There was a pause before the voice answered. 'Are you badly injured?'

'What?'

'Are you badly injured? Are you hurt?'

Calm, stay calm. 'My... something's wrong with my arm, and I can't move my legs. Feel them move, I mean.'

Nothing. Silence.

'Well? Are you still there? Can you help me?

There was another pause before the voice answered. 'Listen... don't panic. It's important that you don't panic. But... I'm afraid I'm trapped down here too. There's a stone, lying across my foot. I can't move.'

Catherine felt something collapse, inside her. 'What?' she said feebly.

'I'm sorry,' said the voice. 'L.. I don't really know what to say. Don't worry. They'll find us. Get us out.'

Catherine, very quietly, began to cry.

Sleep.

'Are you still there?' she said when she woke.

'Yes.' It was a very soft voice. Calm, lilting. It seemed stronger now. 'Yes, I'm here.'

'What's your name?'

Beat. 'My... I'm known as the Doctor.'

'Doctor?'

'Yes.'

Her left hand was working fine. She reached over, felt for the watch on her right arm. It had a light, didn't it? Her fingers touched something sticky, but she tried to ignore it.

Found it. It illuminated the surroundings oh-so-slightly, just enough to see herself. And where she was.

A very small space about as wide as a coffin. Ahead of her, something huge and concrete lay across her waist, pushing her down into the hodge-podge of earth and stone. Her mangled right arm was covered in something dark and liquid. Oh yeah, and it was ten past

three.

Apart from that, just shadow.

'Uh-oh.'

'What is it?'

'L.. I think I'm in trouble.'

'It'll be all right.' His voice was perfectly neutral. 'They'll find us soon. Just have to wait.'

Wait. Right.

'Doctor?'

'Yes?'

'What happened?'

He was quiet for a long time, so long that she began to wonder if he'd fallen asleep, or blacked out.

'Doctor? Are you still there?'

'Yes. I was just... the explosion.' There was a ghost of a sigh. 'The building. Disused... an old factory, perhaps. It blew up. Or rather, it blew in. Imploded. Must have dragged some of the surrounding streets, in with it, in here. Trapped us. Not to worry, though. We'll be found.'

'Yeah. Right.' Catherine coughed. 'Wonder who did it. Terrorists. IRA...'

'I doubt it,' he said flatly. 'Terrorists don't attack disused buildings.'

'Oh. Right. Who do you think it was, then?'

He didn't answer immediately. Instead there was a dim, quiet scratching noise that seemed to grow louder. When his voice finally came it was different. Sharp, urgent.

'Catherine, there's a pile of rubble in front of me. I think you must be behind it. You can't be too far away or we wouldn't be able to talk like this. Just hold on... I'm hoping to clear this away and try and get to you.'

'Thought... thought you couldn't move.'

'I can reach. Just. Once I move all this, we'll worry about how to get to you.'

The scratching sound again. He was coming, moving the rocks.

She had a sudden, clear conviction that he was going to reach her and it would be all right.

Sleep.

'Doctor?'

'Catherine.' He sounded tired. 'I think you should try to stay awake. Concussion...'

'Did you do it? Clear the rubble?'

'Yes.' He sighed. 'Yes, I did. But I found... I found a pipe. An old waste pipe. We've been talking to each other through it. I think you could be further away than I thought.'

'Further?'

'Yes. Below me.'

'Further away.' Her voice was disjointed, the syllables not meshing properly into words. 'Further down?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Stop *saying* that!'

Tears came again. Hot, but they felt clean. She let herself cry for a while. She felt... angry. Angry at who? Who was there to be angry at? These things happened. Every day, somewhere, this was happening to someone.

She stopped crying, then.

'I wonder... wonder who did it. Blew the building up.'

'Does that matter?'

'Yes. Yes, of course it does.'

'Why?'

'Because... because they're bloody swine. Subhuman. They've harmed innocent people. How many more people do you think there are down here? Like us. Trapped. Thanks to them. They're... scum.'

There was a sharp intake of breath.

'Perhaps they didn't mean it,' he said eventually. 'Perhaps they didn't think anyone would get hurt.'

'Perhaps they didn't think.' She snorted mirthlessly. 'That's it. Didn't think. Who'd think of people like you, me? In a hole, waiting to die? Us. We didn't matter to them. Never do.'

He didn't answer.

Catherine coughed again. And again. It hurt, this time. Dull pain, deep in her chest.

'Am I going to die?' She said quietly.

'No.' Too quick. 'They'll find us. Do you know how many people there'll be, searching for us up there? Looking for people like us? We'll be found. We just have to be patient.'

'No choice there.'

'Oh. Yes.' He sounded... apologetic? 'Yes. You see, I've never been in a situation like this before. Never been quite this helpless.'

'Me either. Odd, that.'

Catherine closed her eyes but the darkness didn't alter. Just black. And the intricate, swirling patterns forriling constantly on her retina.

'Catherine?'

She didn't answer. Just thought, imagined the debris above her being heaved away, light flooding over her body. But then she'd have to see herself, know what sort of shape she was in.

'Catherine, there's something you must know. The truth. I'm a believer in the truth, you see. Now. I wasn't always. I used to lie, cheat. For the best of reasons. The greater good.'

'I know the type.'

He seemed surprised at the interruption. 'What?'

'Know you. Know that type. Saving the world, always worrying about saving the world. And while you do, the baby pulls the pan of boiling water off the stove.'

Another pained inhalation. 'That's... an unpleasant analogy. But, well... yes. Worse, in fact If there was a way that it could have saved the world, I'd have... manipulated the baby. Forced it to pull the pan off the stove.'

'Wrong.'

'What?'

'Wrong. Horrible. Manipulating the baby. It's wrong.'

'Perhaps. In fact... yes, yes it is. But, as I said, I don't do that any more.'

'Good for you,' her sarcasm was heavy.

'I caused the implosion.'

She almost didn't hear him. And, when she did, it didn't make any sense. 'What?'

'I caused the implosion. Me. I'm the scum, I'm the subhuman. And it's all... it's all on my conscience.'

'Conscience.' Words, syllables, failed to form properly.

'I didn't -'

'Shut up.' Her voice felt dead.

'You don't understa-'

'Shut up.' He stopped this time. 'Don't want to hear it. Any of it. Quiet '

Sleep. This time she welcomed it with open arms.

'Catherine? Are you there?... Can you hear me?... Perhaps you can't. Perhaps you're asleep. But I'll say this anyway. I'll say this until I can be sure you've heard it. Because, although my actions may seem indefensible to you, you should know that...

'Never mind. You'll find out. If you listen. Please listen. I had to do what I did. I promise you that. I'm not a terrorist. I'm not insane. I didn't want to hurt anyone... the opposite. I'm trying to *save* lives. Millions of lives.

'Maybe...Maybe you don't believe me. Could I blame you if you didn't? I could tell you more, I suppose, about my latest adventure to save the world. Might make me seem better in your eyes. But... well, I'm not sure the details are important. Not now. Not here, in the shadows.

'I was right, you know. I *was*. I had to do what I did. I had to do what I did to save millions of people. *Save* them. Do you see?

'This was... unfortunate. But I had to do it, and if I hadn't the consequences would have been far worse.

'But I'm wrong, too. And you... you were right. When you said that innocents don't matter, not to people like me. I don't forget them. I feel guilt. I know, sometimes, who they were... are. And I know the figures. My casualties. I check, I remember.

'Does that make sense?

'During the Silurian era... hundreds. A whole species. At Fetchborough, fifteen died. At Fang Rock, seven. On a space freighter, heading for prehistoric earth... just one. One dead boy.

'And I know their names. Some of them. Those that I could. I don't forget

'But I forget *this*.

'This reality. The reality of *people*, not just numbers, not just my sacrifices. Which is what people like you sometimes become. Real, innocent people...

'How can I express this? I'm not often stuck for words. What I mean is... I saved the world. I did what had to be done. Tried not to hurt people. Didn't pick up a gun.

'And I'm sorry. Do you hear me?

'I'm *sorry*.'

Awake.

'Doctor?'

'Catherine?' He sounded overjoyed, but... tentative. 'Catherine, is that you?'

'Who else?'

The laugh sounded good. 'You've, ah... you've been quiet for a while. I'm not good at solitude, you know.'

'Tell me.'

A pause, confused. 'Erm...'

'Tell me. What happened.'

A long sigh, tired. 'It's not important. Is it?'

'Yes.' She swallowed. '*Yes*.'

'Why?'

'Because... I want to hear your story. How you saved the world.'

'All right,' he murmured. 'But it's not much of a story, you know. Certainly not memorable.'

'Tell me.'

'All right.' A cough. 'I discovered a disturbance. In the continuum A sort of... passage in space and time, leading here. It came from another world.

'I don't mean another planet, not this time. I mean another universe,

where terrible things live. Terrible things. Things that exist only to cause pain and suffering.

'How they came to be... who they are... it's not important. The universe, I think, just has a way of creating darkness. Shadows to fight against.

'They were coming here. I... I simply closed the passage. Easy, really. I sent a recursive pulse down the space-time corridor that closed both ends. I severed the passage from reality. The... creatures were trapped in a bubble of space-time, floated awayy to the shadow dimensions.

'That's what I do. Trap the monsters, banish them. Send them away and save the innocents.

'Easy, by my standards. But... there was a side-effect. A minor continuum implosion caused by this side of the corridor. I didn't see it coming.

'I tried to stop it, you know. I tried to get to my time-craft to materialise around the imploding area, stabilise it. But I miscalculated. I couldn't get to the TARDIS in time.

'I didn't want this to happen. I tried, I really did. But I failed. that one little loose end.

'And now... all this. All this.'

Catherine grimaced. Experimentally, she touched her right arm. The sticky stuff from before had dried now, and the residue felt cracked and scaly.

'Monsters,' she said.

'Yes.'

'From another world.'

'Yes.' He was quiet for a moment 'I'm... I travel through time. Time and space. Fighting monsters. It sounds silly... *it* is silly. But it's what I do.'

'I believe you,' said Catherine simply.

A long silence then, a silence where once more she became aware of the pain in her body, the deadness below her waist. The darkness and the dust. Too long, too quiet.

'Tell me,' she said.

'What?'

'More. Tell me more about.. what you do.'

'Right.'

It was a long time before he started. But once begun, the didn't end.

It had a start. He told her about his people and what they did, and why he ran from them. Out there, up and out into the universe, to see all the different worlds that existed and all the different sights and sounds and people.

His voice took her with him, through space into the most fantastic worlds she'd ever seen. He told her of the sights he'd seen, people he'd met, friends he'd made. He told her of his different lives, about his deaths and rebirths. He'd been many different men, but always the same person. Always the Doctor.

And there were the monsters, too. The shadows that gave the light a meaning.

He told her of Daleks and Cybermen, the Mara and the Fendahl, and she shivered. He told her of the Chumblies and the Taran beasts and she laughed. He told her of Harry and Sarah, the Brigadier and Tegan, and she smiled.

He told her of Katarina and Adric, and she cried.

He talked and talked. She drifted in and out of sleep as he spoke, missing some of the stories altogether. But that didn't matter, because the only real story was him; and that just went on and on.

'Doctor?'

'You're awake!' He sounded livelier than ever. 'Good.'

'Was I asleep long?'

'A while, this time.'

'It's... cold. And I can't breathe properly, now. Hurts.'

He didn't answer. But then, what could he say?

'I dreamed of you,' she said, wheezing. 'I haven't dreamed since I was down here. But I saw you... your face, out amongst the stars. What do you look like?'

'What did I look like in your dream?'

She thought. 'You were... young. Your face was pale, but kind.

Gentle. You've light brown hair, a sort of chestnut colour. Very long. It comes down to your shoulders, and it shines in the starlight. Your eyes are blue, but your pupils are... if I look close enough, I can see every star in the universe you've seen reflected in them. But I see your friends too. They're there, as important as the stars.'

'Well then,' he said quietly, 'that's what I look like.'

'Doctor?'

'Yes?'

'It's all right. Me being down here. It's all right.'

'I'm still guilty, Catherine.'

'Yes. You have to be. The guilt's part of what makes you do what you do.'

'Maybe.'

'Tell me more stories, Doctor. Please.' She paused, battling for breath. 'I'm tired. But I want to hear... about you. Because if I know that there's someone like you out there, who's real... it's all okay. It's all been worthwhile, and this makes sense.'

'Very well.' His voice was choked, and she knew it would never make sense to him. That he couldn't accept the loss, and never would.

'Doctor?'

'Yes?'

'You'll remember me?'

'Always,' he whispered. 'Always.'

Then the stories began.

And, somewhere in the middle, Catherine slept.

In the end they found him. The light was blinding as the huge concrete piling above him was peeled off, and the rubble on his foot was cleared in seconds. The Doctor stood up, swaying with the effort, the wind sweeping through his hair.

He was all right. Barely scarred. Lucky, they said.

He tried to tell them about Catherine. About the girl trapped below him. They were willing at first, but then one of them saw that orange clay waste pipe. And then they asked the Doctor when he'd last heard her speak.

He slumped, defeated, and told them that it was at least two days.

Then there was a shout... three people at the other side of the wreckage. And the men apologised to the Doctor, and asked him if he was sure he was all right. Then they went and did their jobs.

'You can't leave her down there!' the Doctor said.

One man had stayed, uncertain.

'Look, mate,' he said slowly. 'I'm sorry. I know it must be tough. But she can't be alive. Not now, after what she told you about her injuries. We'll come back, recover her body, as soon as we can.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I understand. It's just... she taught me something. I think.'

The man had looked confused then, and left.

The sun shone behind him as he surveyed the scene. An ordinary street was just a mass of wreckage. Rescue workers scurried beetle like over the rubble, looking desperately for any more people. There were ambulances and reporters and crowds. There were survivors, here and there.

And there were bodies. Innocents. Laid out carefully, corpses covered so that the full extent of the injuries couldn't be seen.

For a moment the scene seemed to shrink before his eyes, to dwindle until the shadow the Doctor cast swallowed it up.

He'd done the right thing. Now he had to do something to make this all right.

He turned to the pile of rubble and that waste pipe, bright in the sun. The sounds and scale of the world came back, and suddenly the Doctor was just another man among hundreds, standing amid devastation.

He grasped the nearest, largest stone, and heaved.

Casket 44

Alex Steer

London: 8 August 1980

Special Investigator Stephen Keane dropped from the back of UNIT's van, feeling the sudden warmth and light of the sun wash over him. They were parked, rather conspicuously, in - he checked - Macdonald Road. It was a nasty area. At least, it was stuck between lots of nasty areas. The street and its terraces were narrow and dirty, between rows of identical streets and an old, high, soot-blackened railway bridge. The London slums, where the suburbs hit the greenbelt to the south. Years of Special Investigations training told him this was the kind of place disease spread fast. And rumours.

And they were here to investigate a murder. A series of murders, four in the last six weeks, including today's. The Met were struggling to keep a lid on the newspaper conspiracists, who thought it was some sort of drug-fuelled satanic techno-cult. Ridiculous, of course, but maybe understandable. The three bodies - all local residents - had been found burnt almost beyond recognition. It was impossible to tell what had killed them. Only that whoever had done it had been precise, almost surgical. Then they had found another body, unburnt. So they had called in Special Investigations, and UNIT had got the scent shortly afterwards.

Keane loathed them, with their Official Secrets and their unaccountable orders from Geneva, suspecting alien intervention at every turn. The company of soldiers were here under sufferance, and answerable to him. This was police business. He had won that particular battle.

But then three hours ago *he* had arrived.

They were setting up a surveillance post in number 34. Fortunately, not many people had noticed, and Corporal Becker was feeding those who had the official UNIT cover story with customary aplomb. It was probably the same wherever they went.

Surveillance training operation. Yeah, right. Still, at least it was better than that 'nest of Man-like reptiles' fiasco a few years back.

He had been there for that, too.

'So,' he said as a young sergeant, Piper, dropped from the van and came up next to him, 'where's the latest?'

'Number 29, sir. This way.'

Piper walked ahead. Keane stared round at the activity. UNIT Personnel HQ, the one based in Kent with the over-obvious signposts, had ordered Keane and his men to set up a mobile base here. Damn cheek, Stephen thought.

Stephen had seen this sort of thing before. When he had been on the Control/Decontamination Team. Back when every few days seemed to bring a new alien invasion. He had been there after Devil's End, after Llanfairfach, cleaning up the mess and the shattered lives that the Taskforce left in its wake. If that was repeated in the city, all hell would break loose.

And *he* was there to make sure it did.

Six weeks. Four murders. UNIT on his case and no reason to trust them.

I hate conspiracies, he thought. And conspiracists.

Becker passed. Obviously the old woman at number 32 was satisfied with the cover.

'Becker,' he said, 'where is he?'

'Who, sir?' Becker smiled back. Smug git.

'You know damn well who,' Keane replied. 'The man who's just made my life a thousand times more difficult than it already was.'

'Oh,' said Becker. 'He's in 29, sir. Insisted on having a look at the body himself.'

'Oh, no,' muttered Stephen. He glanced over towards number 29 - a house identical to all the others in this street. But this one was covered in 'Police Line - Do Not Cross' tape, and there were soldiers in the tiny overgrown garden.

As he got closer, Stephen flashed his ID past the men on guard at the front door, deliberately too fast to read. The door had been forced, the lock broken. Stephen checked his watch - 10.00. It was getting

dark, and someone had erected a lighting gantry in the house's narrow hallway. And in the lounge, of course, with the body...

'Doctor! What the hell are you doing?'

A mile down the road, Sarah Jane Smith (winner of the 1973 Digby Wallace Prize for Investigative Journalism, writer of the controversial 'Saudi Arabia: The World's Torture Chamber', and citizen of the universe) was sitting outside a small all-night café, staring at her coffee.

It felt good to be back somewhere that at least felt like home. On the wall above the café was a sign advertising this as Nelson Square, a small, grubby collection of corner shops and litter bins in the squalor of the parts of south-east London which were too far out even to be properly urban.

On the other side of the square, as far from her as possible, was something which had disappeared from London about, oh, eleven years ago. She tried to avoid looking at it. It had certainly attracted some unwelcome attention in the three hours since the Doctor had disappeared.

She took another sip of coffee, regretted it. So this was 1980. The future, she had thought when they had first arrived. But she had been travelling with the Doctor six years now, her time. If she had stayed, she would have reached 1980 by now. This was the present. The real 1980.

Sarah thought so anyway, but the Doctor had muttered something before he had disappeared about temporal nexus points, and how they had no definite timelines. Whatever that meant. But this was the 1980 they had saved from Sutekh, the 1980 where humanity still existed. She had wanted to see it, and the Doctor had brought her here. And disappeared. He had grumbled, of course, but she got the feeling he wanted to see it as much as she did. To see his own handiwork.

Sarah left her coffee, and began to walk away from Nelson Square in the direction the Doctor had taken.

She turned left down a small alley. In between the shadows of buildings rubbish sprawled. Instinctively she flipped her bag around so the opening rested against her side. Ridiculous, really. Of all the things

she had seen, few frightened her more than being alone in strange places. She looked back, and caught a glimpse of the police box, reassuringly familiar.

She turned again, and there was someone there. Right there, in front of her. Young white male, maybe mid-20s. Her mind was already writing the journalist's incident report. Dark coat, shirt, and trousers. Several days' worth of stubble and missed sleep.

He was staring at her, and his eyes were mad. 'You,' he said.

Then he reached out and grabbed her ann. Tight. Sarah noticed what looked like a knife in his other hand.

'Here,' she murmured automatically, pushing the bag towards him.

'You're with the machine,' he said. His breath smelled of alcohol and rotting meat. The knife glinted, and started to move.

'What?' This was insane. She'd fought off God knew how many monsters. To die in a botched mugging felt so wrong.

His arm flicked up towards her. Skin and metal flashed by, but not in the right ways. It was like -

- like the knife was becoming part of his hand.

Then something slammed into the man: hit hard. Another man - tall, black, about the same age. Whatever was in the white man's hand fell loose. Sarah heard metal skidding across the ground.

Everything flashed by in the darkness. The two men were struggling, and then Sarah's attacker was pushing the black man off, breaking into a run. He was grabbing Sarah, picking her up, taking her away.

For some reason, she forgot to scream. Maybe she was looking at the metal on the ground - metal which was not a knife after all, but countless thin shards. Perhaps, in the confused seconds which followed, she saw the man's left hand, covered in a web of deep red lines, scars, as if -

- as if the skin had been sliced open and put back together by tiny razor blades. From the inside.

Then she screamed.

The tiny living room of number 29 Macdonald Road had been turned into a makeshift mortuary. White sheeting covered every surface. There was no carpet, very little furniture: just a stack of bills and some

unpacked tea chests. Rented accommodation. A house, not a home. That was what he noticed first.

And the Doctor, of course. And the body.

The house's occupant was lying beneath a white plastic shroud in the middle of the floor, surrounded by stark white lights that fought off the growing darkness.

The man kneeling beside the body had sucked all the colour of the room into himself. A mess of fabrics and curly hair. He was wearing an impossibly long scarf, months out of season. The lights shone down on him. It looked like someone had stolen his shadow. He looked up with big blue eyes.

'Ah!' he said, and stood. He stepped neatly over the body and shook Stephen's hand roughly. 'Hello, Inspector...'

'Keane. Stephen Keane.'

'Oh.' The man's eyebrows danced like an alien language. 'I'm the Doctor—'

'I know.' '- and this is Dominic Green.'

Stephen frowned. But the Doctor was staring at the body. He sounded like he was introducing a relative, or a companion.

'What are you doing here, Doctor?' Stephen asked. He had turned up in Macdonald Road about three hours ago. If it was UNIT, and frankly Stephen suspected it was, God only knew how they had tracked him down so fast. He had an elusive reputation.

He half-shrugged. 'Well... I was in the area, and I saw your men. They seem to be keeping a low profile.'

'Not my men. But you're right: we're rumour control.'

'I see. That could be difficult.'

Stephen knelt by the body. The Doctor joined him. 'It's already difficult. This is a police matter. I don't need UNIT on my case.'

'They do have a long history of this sort of thing.'

'So do we.' He breathed deeply. 'Look, Doctor, this isn't some alien invasion attempt. It's a Code 14.'

'Code 14?' The Doctor frowned. 'Hmm, a dangerous, possible psychopathic killer in a high-exposure area?'

Keane looked surprised. 'Yes. I've spent most of today on the phone. Your people were itching to get involved.'

'My people? Oh, I think that's quite unlikely...'

'UNIT. Guess they think incinerated corpses are their business.'

'Well, we'd better take a look.'

'Do you have clearance?' Stephen asked.

'Oh, I have clearance for everything,' the Doctor said. Then he pulled the shroud away.

Beneath was a young man, lying where he had been found.

'His neck's been snapped,' Stephen observed. 'That must be how the others died. But look at his face.'

It was covered in dark lines, like a crude jigsaw. They stretched all over the head.

'Those marks,' said the Doctor, 'mark the weaker points in the bones of the skull. Entry points.'

Stephen looked up. 'Meaning?'

'Meaning someone split this poor unfortunate's skull open, then put it back together.' His face was grave. 'Still think this is a serial killer, Mr Keane?'

'Yes,' he said firmly. 'But you're here now, so we'll probably be dodging alien monsters by midnight.'

'Probably,' the Doctor mused. 'I have a habit of walking into these things, don't I?'

'You should see your police file.'

'Police file?' He frowned. 'Well, I knew UNIT were looking out for me...'

'You have no idea. Neither did I, until you turned up today.' He smiled. 'I spent an hour on the phone trying to get your background. You're tricky.'

'Well, I try.' He did that just-fell-from-the-sky shrug. But Stephen looked at him, and he saw something deeper and darker. This Doctor, clearly, had not adopted the action man mentality or foppish charm of his previous identity. Far from someone who had just fell from the sky, thought Stephen, he looks like it's fallen on him.

'What are you doing here?' Stephen asked.

'I told you...'

'And I still don't believe you. Who sent you?'

'Not UNIT. Not this time. If someone planned all this, it wasn't me.'

'Planned?'

'Yes. This bears the unmistakable hallmark of a summons. What's happening?'

'I'm investigating. That's what's happening. Like I said, I'm rumour control. There are no conspiracies, Doctor. This is a Code 14, no more. I don't need a panic. I don't care why you're here, but while you are you follow my instructions.'

The Doctor looked shocked. 'Maybe. But if you're right, you've still got a Springheeled Jack in the neighbourhood.'

Stephen shook his head. 'Rippers rip. Whoever did this was precise. Surgical.'

'Whoever did this,' the Doctor said, 'had a very specific target.'

'I don't think so. No apparent connection. I think we're looking at some sort of obsessive psychopath somewhere in this area. Apart from that, we can't afford to make guesses.'

'I don't think murder was on his mind,' the Doctor said.

'What?'

'I think the deaths are coincidental to what's really at large here. Look.'

Stephen looked, at the face and its map of resealed scars.

Protruding from each thin red line were dozens of microscopic, hair-thin needles.

'Oh...' he began. The Doctor looked up at him, his eyes grave.

'I think whoever did this isn't murdering. He is stealing to order.'

Keane's gaze flickered between Dominic Green's face and the Doctor. He was reaching in, pulling out one of the tiny needles with his fingernails. It slid out covered in a thin red fluid. It was several inches long, slightly hollow. Like-

-a syringe.

'Oh no.'

In the Doctor's eyes Stephen Keane saw what he most feared. A conspiracy.

'After all,' he barely heard the Doctor say, 'how many serial killers suck out their victims' brains?'

Then Stephen's world descended into chaos. The Doctor was smiling at him, too knowingly.

Stephen stood, and walked out.

'We have to move!'

It was getting dark.

What am I doing here?

That was the first thing Sarah though when the man put her down. Then, predictably, *where am I?*

She opened her eyes. As they adjusted to the dark she saw shapes move into focus. Headstones. She was in a cemetery, small and hidden by high hedges. She was in the middle of the graveyard, surrounded by the dead.

It was dark. The man who had attacked her - who had *kidnapped* her - had run for at least ten minutes. She glanced round. He was a few feet away, standing alone, breathing heavily.

He was coming over.

He didn't speak as he picked her up - lifted her off her feet and dangled her in the air. Then he punched her in the stomach

'We've been waiting for you,' he said. Then he raised his left hand.

The skin of the palm and fingers was already splitting. Peeled back by thousands of long, thin needles, each one writhing on a strand of reshaped muscle. They were reaching out for Sarah.

She closed her eyes as the first of the needles pushed against her face. She felt cold before pain.

All the way here she had tried to work out what he would do to her, to prepare. She hadn't imagined this.

'Kramer!'

Then she was being dropped. She hit the ground hard. There were scratches on her face, but nothing more.

A few feet away was the black man. He was holding a broken bottle now, staring down the white man - Kramer.

'Drummond. Don't interfere. She's one of them. She's sensitive.'

The black man kept his distance. 'I want out, Kramer,' he said. 'I don't want to do this any more.'

'You attacked me,' Kramer said. 'Unwise.'

'Did you hear me?' replied Drummond.

The white man nodded, slowly. 'I heard you. But there is no out.

Either you work for me, or you die like the rest of them.'

'And who do you work for, Kramer? Tell me.'

'You wouldn't wanna know.' Kramer's voice was husky. 'You work for me, and that's all that matters.'

'I got in for the money. Same as I got into stealing cars and dealing and everything else.'

'Of course.' Kramer took a step towards Drummond, who waved the bottle defensively.

'Stay back.' Kramer took another step. Drummond stepped back. He had lost the initiative, Sarah realised. 'I said stay back, Kramer...'

'Go, Drummond. Get out of here. Join the others. My team. Be back here in ten.' Kramer reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette and a box of matches. He lit up, and Sarah noticed his hand had returned to normal. Apart from the deep scars.

'No way. I want paid and I want out. I don't work for no-one unless I know what's going on.'

'It's best that you don't. That's my business. I pay you, you do the job. No-one has to know.'

Drummond laughed. A hollow laugh. 'They already do. They've found another one of your victims. You didn't get rid of the body. You screwed up.'

'What?' Kramer snarled.

'They're all there. Police, soldiers. In Macdonald Road. They'll find you.'

'No way.' Kramer moved closer to Drummond. Drummond moved back. They dodged and twisted like dancers, or fighters.

'They will. And I'm not sticking around. I don't kill people. And I don't steal bodies.'

Sarah caught her breath. She had to get to the Doctor. He'd want to know.

'I can't trust you, Drummond,' Kramer was saying. 'You're... a liability.'

Then Kramer leapt forward, and grabbed Drummond by the neck. He squeezed. He was snapping the black man's neck. Then his other hand was over Drummond's face, splitting like ripe fruit. Needles probed his skull, until they hovered in perfect formation, ready to

plunge down.

Sarah stood, ran. Behind her she heard screams.

Kramer lit another match, and dropped it onto Drummond. The clothes started to burn. It would take longer without petrol, but there would be nothing left by morning. It wasn't worth extracting the brain tissue, and they had more than enough bodies here. He barely registered that the girl was gone. His employees were arriving.

It was time to gather the harvest.

14 Macdonald Road is abandoned. The windows are boarded up and the garden is overgrown. It makes the perfect base of operations for those observing the emerging chaos in this part of the city.

In the darkness of an upstairs bedroom, a point of light appears. A perfect blue, it extends into a line, stretching from ceiling to floor, casting a cool glow across the bare floor for several yards.

Between light and shadow is a man. He wears a black suit. His hair is jet black, his skin paper white. Only his eyes are remarkable. The same blue as the light in the room. Blue like crystal. But then, his eyes aren't human any more. Just one of the things his employers have done to him, to make him better. He speaks, and his voice is cold.

'Comnicos to control. The situation is proceeding within acceptable parameters. I have located the path of the anomaly. But there are time-active elements operating within this area. This considerably narrows our margin of error.' He pauses. 'You may proceed with phase two of the operation.'

Mr Comnicos watches the beam of light. After a few seconds, it flickers.

He understands what this means. A signal distortion. The first sign of phase two. He turns away.

Outside, a strange storm is brewing.

Soon his employers will be here. Until then, he will observe.

After all, they have a rigid policy of non-intervention.

A few miles away, in one of the UNIT vans winding their way from

Macdonald Road, Stephen slept. Strange men and conspiracies haunted his dreams.

'I have a nasty feeling about this,' the Doctor says. 'The other bodies were burnt. We have to get this to UNIT before the killer comes to cover his tracks...'

Words. But the Doctor is saying other things to the soldiers, things Stephen cannot hear.

Conspiracies in the night.

Now he is back in Macdonald Road again, never questioning the illogic of his position. Except that the road is different. All the houses are in different positions, different styles, he realises. The street sign says something, but he cannot see what. Somewhere, music is playing.

And it is bright. No shadows at all. Except for the pools of darkness at the edges of his vision, and they are moving.

And they have hands. And voices.

'Stephen,' they say. 'You have trapped us. Now the war begins, and you must set us free.'

He keeps turning, but the shadow figures skirt around him. But they are getting closer, and spreading their non-arms over him.

And now the street and the sun are disappearing, and all is shadows and black and

- he opened his eyes. He looked around, and saw the comfortingly bland interior of one of the UNIT vans. He was sitting on a bench bolted to one side. His suit was a mess.

Dominic Green's body was on the floor of the van, shrouded. He knelt down beside it. For some reason it was wired to a heart monitor, which hummed a flatline. It was impossible, unnatural. Years of cleaning up after UNIT had proved to him that aliens existed. But this was something different. This was happening in the middle of his community, his city. There was something sick and twisted about it, he thought. He hadn't been prepared. This was ordinary police business. This was the real world.

It was the Doctor. He bent reality.

They would have to evacuate Macdonald Road now. Stephen lifted

the shroud. Dominic Green's face was oddly peaceful, except for the hideous scars. He looked so still.

-bip-

Stephen looked up. A kink in the heart monitor's green line was scrolling off the small screen.

-bip-

Another. More. He barely noticed Dominic's hand twitching. Getting faster, like the corpse's heartbeat. It was at two-fifty per minute, still rising.

Then the body was spasming, going into some sort of seizure. Its face was still dead, but its limbs thrashed over the metal floor.

'Doctor! Get in here!' Stephen shouted, just as the heart monitor's alarms began to scream.

It was half past eleven.

In the dark silence of the deaf and blind, something registered. With no frame of reference, no senses, it took him some time to discover what. But the discovery itself was the answer. He was alive.

'Hurry up!' yelled Stephen. 'It's going crazy.' The noise from the monitor was frenzied as UNIT troops swarmed in.

Then, at 11.31, Dominic Green's body opened its eyes.

Heat and pain. That was all he remembered. But now he could not feel his body. He had to be dead, but his brain was still registering something. Maybe this was hell.

Someone had produced a syringe of some tranquilliser by the time the Doctor stepped into the van. The convoy had stopped by the side of the road. A soldier pressed the syringe into Dominic's neck.

Stephen was standing up. He looked terrified as he walked over.

'His eyes opened,' he managed. 'He was still alive.'

The Doctor looked at the body. The spasming was dying down, the pulse disappearing.

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I think it's something much worse than that.'

'No way,' Stephen said. 'I told you, I don't want conspiracy theories. I want facts. And even if I accept that someone *is* sucking out people's brains and burning their bodies, I'm not buying the walking dead.' He stared at the Doctor, hard. Willing him to argue. Step too far and I'll nail you.

'The fact is, that body is dead, Mr Keane.' The Doctor glanced over to Dominic Green. No movement, no pulse.

'Outside,' said Stephen.

He should be dead. He remembered pain, needles pushing through his skin, and finally a burning heat as he had finally worked out that Kramer wasn't quite human any more. Then numbness, and after that nothing. Maybe he was dead.

They were on an empty stretch of road. The UNIT van loomed above them.

'You don't understand, do you?' snarled Stephen. 'This is not your business.'

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'I think...'

'You never think!' Stephen grabbed the Doctor's coat lapels. The man's eyes widened in surprise as Stephen pushed him away from the van roughly. 'You just walk in! You interfere without permission, you move without restriction, you act without responsibility!'

The Doctor twisted, shifted free of Stephen's grasp. He held the smaller man's shoulders, and stared into his eyes. 'My responsibility,' he said, 'is to the universe.'

Stephen stared back. The Doctor's eyes were shining in the darkness.

'This isn't the universe, Doctor. This is London. I've got my own responsibilities. I've got a family.'

'Yes. I had a family once. I think.'

'I want to get back to them,' Stephen continued. 'I want to close this case.'

'What are you afraid of?' the Doctor asked.

'I'm afraid of you,' he whispered. 'I'm afraid of all the things that happen when you turn up. All the lives that get destroyed. When I saw

that body... I knew it was starting all over again. Another Devil's End. Another Llanfairfach.'

The Doctor looked at him again, with those eyes of his. 'Then we need to go. If we can get Dominic's body to UNIT tonight we stand a chance of finding his killer before anyone else dies. If we can't, then we will both fail, and this creature will have a whole city to devour.'

Stephen turned, but the Doctor was gone, walking away towards another vehicle.

There was pain, where his nerves had survived. Some sensation in his hands and face. He was lying on something soft and organic. The ground. He was still in the cemetery -

- where Kramer had killed him.

He managed to stand, pushing charred muscles. He started to walk: a slow lurch, controlled falling. Pain burst over his limbs, but he went on. Only after several yards did he realise that he was blind. But he knew where he was going. There were new senses now, wired into his brain, put there by whoever had stopped him from dying.

Kramer had tried to kill him, but something had lived on. His soul, maybe.

Perhaps that was why moving his limbs was so hard. Perhaps that was why, mapped over the darkness of his resurrected mind, he could sense every mind in the city. Most were sleeping now, but the murmur of thoughts never stopped. It was more acute, more vivid than sight had ever been. And there, in the tumult, were minds more than human. They shone like beacons on the sea, and they seemed to be congregating in the streets nearby, strange powers gathering in the city.

One was Kramer. But Kramer had been human once. He had lived in the area all his life, got involved with local crime - small-time stuff, until he had got involved with the drug-pushers, gunned down in a shoot-out off Junction Street. But now he was back, cooler and stronger than ever, and he had taken over the old gangs. Then the grave robbing had started; the murders.

Drummond smiled. At last things were fitting together. Whatever had rewired Kramer's mind had rewired his, accidentally or deliberately.

There were other minds out there, he realised. Ones that had never even been human. One of them was in Macdonald Road, somewhere around number 14, 15.

An alien.

Fainter still, a few miles away, was another. Drummond couldn't tell if this one was human or not, but it was powerful.

But there were gaps, spaces where superhuman minds should have been. Four in all. Kramer's victims, he realised. Humans, but with - what? Psychic powers? So, why was Kramer collecting them?

He continued. He was out of the cemetery now, on the dark streets. Far away he could hear a thumping disco beat.

There was one more special mind. Human, but different, like the two aliens. Someone... *sensitive*, moving slowly towards Macdonald Road.

The girl. He had to find the girl.

And a new body.

At one o'clock, Corporal Niels Becker was settling for the night shift in number 29 Macdonald Road. In the upper room that looked over the street he slouched in an armchair, cradling an automatic rifle in his arms, staring into the darkness.

There was a mirror on the wall. A tacky ornamental one, like everything else in the place. After a while Becker stood and walked over and fixed his hair beneath his beret.

He looked good. Blond hair and dazzling blue eyes: Scandinavian blood, as he told whoever listened. As a kid he'd always received compliments on his blue eyes.

There was a sound behind him. In the mirror, he saw something moving; an impossibly black shape. Shadow limbs were unfolding, reaching out. He could smell burning.

Becker screamed.

Sarah stepped over the threshold, into the burnt-out remains of number 29.

She had arrived in Macdonald Road at half-one, after two hours' wandering the streets, running and searching. It was full of police and soldiers, and one of the houses was ablaze. Therefore, the Doctor had

been here.

The house was number 29, a surveillance post. Someone called Sergeant Piper had briefed her inexpertly: something about a series of unexplained murders. Number 29 belonged to the latest victims. Now one of the soldiers was missing, presumed dead in the house.

And the Doctor had disappeared.

So she had blagged her way in. If he was there, she wanted to know for sure.

Inside it was soot-black, and the stairs were badly damaged. She navigated them slowly, almost falling twice. It took minutes to get to the upper room.

Inside was dark: ash-covered windows, carpet smouldering.

Outside, a police car's light began flashing, half-lighting the room.

Only then did she notice there was someone in there.

He was completely black: black suit, black shirt, skin colour of ash. He rested against a black wall, eyes closed.

'Hello,' he said.

He opened his eyes, and they were dazzling blue.

'Who are you?' Sarah managed.

'Don't you remember? Well, I've changed. Picked up some things. Suit: Paris. Shoes: Italy. Eyes: UNIT.' He smiled, flashing ivory teeth.

Sarah stared. 'The man from the cemetery? Drummond?'

He nodded. 'Kramer killed me. He's not human, you know.'

Sarah shook her head. 'Thought not.'

'Oh, of course. You're with the time traveller. I can tell, you see. You're *sensitive*.'

'Sensitive? To what?'

'To the vortex. But you're also human.'

'Totally,' Sarah said.

Drummond walked over. 'Me too, until tonight. I'm still human, but not *one* human.' He giggled. 'And there are alien things in my mind. Genes, I guess.'

'How did you survive, then?' Sarah trusted him, for no reason she could guess. Because he had saved her?

'The genes - biodata, I think - make your own DNA... adaptable.

You saw Kramer's hand?'

Sarah nodded. 'And you did the same to the Doctor?'

'God, no,' Drummond laughed. 'To that soldier.' He indicated the corner of the room. There was something there Sarah didn't want to see. 'Necessary, I'm afraid. I have to stop Kramer.'

'So,' Sarah said, 'you're the good guy, are you?'

'Far from it, love. I'm the unlikeliest hero. I want revenge. The time traveller, I guess he's the good guy.'

'The Doctor?' said Sarah. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

Drummond nodded. 'But there are two travellers here. If you could see what I can see now...'

'What?'

'Whoever controls Kramer saved me. By accident, of course. A botched job, y'know? The two of us, we're both dead men, but he's under someone else's control.'

'I guessed that. He knew I was *sensitive*, remember? Who's controlling him?'

Drummond smiled. 'Dunno. Like I said, there are two travellers here. One's yours, but the other's watching whoever's haunting Kramer's brain. Some sort of secret agent. There's gonna be a war.'

'Why should I believe all this?'

Drummond stared at her with his blue eyes. 'There's a storm brewing.' Outside, it was raining. The clouds were churning, too fast, like water down a drain.

'It's like...' she breathed.

'A vortex.'

Sarah stared back. 'Right. How long do we have?'

'No telling. This is the staging area. Kramer... he's building an army. An army of the dead.'

'Of course,' said Sarah. 'The grave robbing. But what about those other murders?'

'Humans with psychic powers. He's got all the body parts he needs in the cemeteries, but he needs brains.'

'What for?'

'I'm not sure.' Drummond began to walk to the door. His movements

were jerky, like Ray Harryhausen animations.

This was wrong, Sarah thought. I can sense it. Am I getting *sensitive*, or just jumpy?

'Help me, then,' Sarah said. 'This sort of thing is what I do. Without the Doctor here we're the only ones who can stop this. Whatever this is.'

Drummond smiled. 'I'll show you.'

The convoy pulled up into the UNIT HQ forecourt. Stephen was directing soldiers, getting the body inside the concrete bulk of the Research Complex.

The Doctor walked over to a tall, blond-haired man who was giving orders to a number of UNIT soldiers.

'Hello,' he said, extending a hand. 'I'm the Doctor, I'm supervising this investigation.' Somewhere, he heard Stephen cough pointedly.

'Andrew Cross,' the man said. 'Scientific Advisor.'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'I need to see Dr Harry Sullivan.' Cross stared back at him. The Doctor retracted the unshaken hand. 'Is he still chief medical officer?'

'Arrest him,' Cross said.

'You can't do this,' Stephen said as they stepped into Cross's briefing room. Cross rounded on him.

'Do you trust him?' he asked.

Stephen shrugged. 'I don't know. I've never met him before.'

'He's dangerous,' the scientific advisor said.

'He knows what he's talking about. I've seen his record.' Stephen glanced across. It was lying on Cross's desk, half-open. Cross walked over, picked up a handful of documentation, and waved it at Stephen. Keane caught a glimpse of a series of black-and-white long-distance photos. All showing different men.

'Then you know about him. You know about the London Event. You know about Llanfairfach and Devil's End and the Nestene incursion.'

Stephen stepped closer, leaned over Cross's desk, staring him down. 'I was there. I was on Control/Decontamination. I know he was there during all the major events. And I know he won.'

'You know nothing, Mr Keane.' Cross tossed the documents aside, picked up another. 'You're Special Investigations - a government liaison. You spend most of your time at Scotland Yard, for God's sake. Do you know how many people have to die each time the Doctor has one of his Pyrrhic victories?'

'This is a police matter.'

'Not any more,' said Cross. 'This is in Biotech Division's hands now.' He waved an official piece of paper at Keane.

'I want him on my team.'

'It's my team now, Mr Keane. I'm BioDiv's scientific advisor. Special Investigations are here in' - he read from the document - '"a supervisory capacity only". And the Doctor is not involved.'

Stephen picked up the phone and dialled an extension number. 'Biotechnology Division, please.' He waited. 'I'd like to speak to your head of operations. Yes, it's urgent. Dr Sullivan, please...'

The holding cell was plain white. There was a chair in the middle of the floor, around which the Doctor paced furiously.

'Tell me,' he said. 'Do you know who I am?'

The young guard on the door nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

The Doctor walked up to him, stared into his face. 'Who am I, then?'

'You're the Doctor.'

The Doctor did a half-turn, spun back and grabbed the guard's shoulders. 'Well that can't be right!' he bellowed. 'I shouldn't be in here! I should be out there!'

'You are under arrest, sir,' the boy reminded him.

'Am I? When was the last time you saw me?'

The boy stared at him. 'I've... never met you before, sir.'

'Ah! Well, how do you know it's me?'

'Photographs. This is you in your third... body.'

'Fourth.' said the Doctor. 'Have there been more since then? What did I look like last time?'

'UNIT last saw you in '77, sir. You were smaller, with fair hair, sir.'

"77?' the Doctor's eyes bulged. 'That means I've been on the loose for three years!'

'But…'

He patted his sides. 'This can't be me at all! Guards! There's an escaped man on the loose!'

'I can't just... that is...' said the guard.

Then the door opened. Stephen walked in. The Doctor rushed up to him.

'Perfect timing! I escaped in 1977!'

'Doctor,' said Keane. 'You can supervise. I've got you clearance. You're free.'

'Oh.'

Sarah and Drummond crouched behind a burnt-out car. It was raining hard now, and the clouds were still churning.

'Where are we?' Sarah asked breathlessly.

'Grover's warehouse. This is where Kramer's built his army.'

'Or whoever Kramer's controlled by.'

'Yeah. Come on.' Drummond half-stood.

'Wait,' Sarah said. She grabbed his sleeve. 'If whatever's controlling Kramer needs an army, why doesn't he just do the same to everyone in London?'

Drummond frowned. 'Maybe it can't. Kramer got shot up pretty bad. He died, like me.'

'Of course,' Sarah murmured. 'And now they're stealing bodies. Obviously it can only control dead minds.'

He nodded. 'Makes sense. It's turned Kramer into some sort of queen bee. He's transformed. He's not human. And now...'

'It needs drones,' Sarah finished. 'When did this start?'

'About six weeks ago.'

'Along with the murders. Of course.'

Drummond was looking at her. 'Do this a lot?'

She grinned. 'I'm a journalist. Let's go.'

They stole across the courtyard to the door of the warehouse. They both stared through the gap.

Inside, Kramer and his men were at work. Lined up on the walls and floor were dozens of vats, made up of countless different materials: glass of many colours; plastics; rusting metals. Most were little more than old oil drums. In the more transparent ones Sarah could see clear

fluid. In each lay a corpse.

They were in various stages of decay: some skeletal, others almost human. No. Not decay.

Regeneration.

The vats were plumbed to a network of old copper pipes, leading to a huge central glass vat. Inside was a more concentrated form of the fluid.

'What is it?' Sarah gagged.

'Biomatter from Kramer's four victims. And from himself. He's feeding it into those vats.'

'He's growing an army?'

'Yeah.'

Inside, the first of the drones was being born. I'm a father, Kramer thought.

The lift doors opened, and they emerged hundreds of feet below ground, deep in UNIT's secure vaults. Cross swiped a security clearance card through a wall-mounted reader. 'We had to destroy Dominic Green's body. I'll show you why.'

The Doctor and Stephen followed. This was the Biotechnology Division's vault. The dark corridor stretched into the distance. On either side were transparent semi-cylinders, glowing with a faint blue light. 'Containment tanks,' the Doctor murmured.

After several minutes Cross stopped before one of the tanks set into the wall. A small plaque read: '44'. The preservation fluid was turquoise, and glowed brightly.

'The Intrusion Counter-Measures Group found its occupant twenty years back,' Cross said.

The Doctor stepped closer. Inside was the body of a ten year-old boy.

'I took a brain tissue sample from Dominic Green. It contained non-human biodata. The exact same biodata was found in this body two decades ago. I had to destroy Green's body.'

'But why?' the Doctor said.

'Risk of contagion. When they found this one, three soldiers were

infected with alien biomatter.'

Stephen was staring at the body.

'How long did it live for?' the Doctor asked.

Cross breathed in. 'It's still alive.'

'What?'

'We normally pick up an impulse every year or so. But these last few weeks it's been going crazy. As if it's waking up. We think it's the alien biodata in its brain.'

'I think you might be right,' said the Doctor. 'But who is it?'

'We don't know,' Cross admitted.

'Yes we do,' said Stephen. 'It's me.'

In the warehouse they waited, clad in rags and wet with fluid, new skin flexing in the artificial light. The first ten of his hybrid army.

In Kramer's hand was a shining crystal: the Control Device, formed in the gene pool, a focus for controlling the drones' minds.

Kramer looked at them. None was fully human now. Two or three had already unfurled into full battle mode, skin splitting open like fruit to reveal lethal tentacles, parts of the alien biodata wired through them.

These were the strongest. In the vats, a hundred more were growing.

His master was pleased. Kramer felt it through his mind. It was his master - no, his employer - and his saviour. He had been a dead man, and the being had reached out to him, told him he was *sensitive*, and to go and find other sensitives, to build an army.

Enemy vessels sweeping through the vortex. He could feel one of their agents already here, in Macdonald Road. So, that was to be the battleground. He could feel -

Drummond. He was near, with the girl, the time-active.

'Our enemies are already here,' he said. A mental command flashed through the group. 'Hunt them down.'

'They know we're here,' said Drummond. 'I can read their thoughts. Come on.'

They ran across the warehouse forecourt. At its perimeter was an old Cortina.

Sarah glanced back. The drones were leaving the warehouse, following her. They walked normally, even as their skins split into a mass of inhuman tentacles. Some had grafted metal blades onto their bodies. Their rotten burial clothes shredded further.

'Kramer's car,' Drummond said. He wrenched the handle off and pulled open the door. Sarah ran round and jumped in the passenger side. The car started, hotwired, and they roared away.

In the mirror she saw the drones following. They were incredibly fast. They didn't look quite human: their skin was corpse grey, eyes rotted to black. It was impossible to tell whether they had been male or female.

'Where are we going?' she shouted over the engine noise.

'Macdonald Road,' Drummond replied.

'Somewhere there's a photograph of me on my tenth birthday. And that's what I looked like. It's me, Doctor.'

The Doctor ran a hand over the glass of the casket. 'If you're right, I don't even want to think about what that may mean.'

'Cloning?' said Cross. 'We can't do that now, let alone back then.'

'Dr Cross, you said this body contained the same biomatter as Dominic Green?' Cross nodded. 'That biodata was left in him by his killer. When Stephen was left with the body it began to react.'

The Doctor walked over to Keane. 'Like calling like, reaching out.'

'Wait,' Stephen said. 'Are you saying that whoever killed Dominic Green was - what? Me?'

'No,' replied the Doctor. 'I'm saying whoever killed him had had his biodata rewired to match yours. Or rather, this body's.' He motioned towards the corpse in the casket 'This isn't your *doppelganger*, Stephen. This is you. It has no right to be, but it is. Like everything which has happened tonight.'

'Listen. I want to keep this professional, Doctor. If you know what's going on here...'

'I wish I did. But there are too many questions. It's too personal. And I can't help feeling that the answers lie in there.'

'Can I contact it?' Stephen said. 'I mean, if it is me, I want to know what's going on. You're right - it's personal. It's me.'

'It could be dangerous,' the Doctor murmured.

'It already is. People are dying.'

'Yes. But that's not all.' He closed his eyes. 'The vortex has gone. I can't help feeling like I've walked into the middle of a paradox.'

'Paradox?'

'Yes, paradox. I said before this felt like a summons. The same inevitability. I think someone has sealed off this planet from space and time. I only know one species that can do that. And I want answers.'

'Astute, Doctor,' said Stephen. No: it was Stephen's voice, but not his words. He looked, and saw Stephen with his palms pressed against the glass of the casket, eyes closed. Like calling to like.

'So,' the Doctor said. 'You know who I am. Now tell me who you are.'

Your people created me, for wars they fought against terrible enemies. I am a weapon. I am Catastrophe. And like the best weapons I am alive. My function is destruction by stealth. I was designed in the heart of the panatropic net.

I am one of many, sent into situations too dangerous for conventional weaponry. I do not exist in the physical universe until I activate. I am a genetic weapon. When I am despatched to a combat location I move through the vortex. Even time-active weapons must at some point reinsert themselves into the physical universe. This is a weakness: they can be detected. Not so me. I find a host body on any world to which I am sent, and replace its biodata with my own. It ceases to exist, and is replaced in an instant by me. Perfect and undetectable transference.

I was sent to Earth to lie in wait for the day the war would come here. I found a host: a child. But transference failed. The child's timeline split: two life forms, not one, emerged. This human, Keane, and this shell you see now. I was trapped, a spark of life inside a dead body, for twenty years. Slowly, I have been building my power.

Now I have a new host. One with latent psi-powers. He is building an army from the dead. My powers are so few now; I can only control the resurrected. And soon I shall be fully aliv-

Stephen collapsed to the ground. The Doctor looked up. Cross had put a foot through the glass of the casket.

'It's dead,' he said.

'No,' replied the Doctor. 'That was just a host. It has a new one now, and soon it will be strong enough to break back into reality.'

'What did it mean?' gasped Stephen as he stood.

'My people don't like leaving their secrets around for anyone to find. Especially when they're at war. They're probably already here. Waiting to erase this planet rather than give away their secrets.'

'At least we've caught our killer,' Stephen said.

'We know who it is. They're killing psychics and time-sensitives. And that means Sarah.' He looked at Keane, and Cross. 'We have to go.'

The UNIT helicopter touched down around the corner from Macdonald Road. The area had been evacuated. The Doctor and Stephen were first onto the ground.

'Chaos follows me wherever I go,' the Doctor murmured.

'You're a myth,' Stephen said.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'I'm a man. And like all men I am under authority. And I have to stop what I see happening here.'

'What is happening?'

'The end of the world.'

'Be serious.'

'It's no laughing matter. The destruction of this world, and its replacement with one so outwardly identical that no-one will ever know the difference.'

'You're not joking, are you?'

'There are nearly six billion people on this planet. All of them will be wiped out tonight. What started as a murder investigation has uncovered a conspiracy of genocide.'

'A conspiracy.'

'Yes, a conspiracy!' shouted the Doctor. 'One so terrible the universe will never be able to escape it. Earth is important, Mr Keane. Not just to its own inhabitants. There are people who would do anything to get hold of the secrets Earth has hidden.'

They strode down Macdonald Road together. Halfway down, near

the railway bridge, an old Cortina pulled out in front of them. Sarah jumped out, followed by a black man with dazzling blue eyes.

'Sarah!' yelled the Doctor. 'You're alive. Good girl.'

'This is Drummond,' she said. 'He's, erm, a good guy.' Behind them, Drummond laughed.

Stephen checked his watch. 3.30.

'But I'm not.' From the shadow of the bridge, Kramer emerged. He was surrounded by a group of half-human figures. In his hand was the shining crystal of the Control Device.

'We brought company,' Sarah said. But the Doctor was walking over to Kramer.

'You and your master have caused untold destruction.'

'That's the free market,' Kramer said. 'I prefer to call it my employer.'

'The Catastrophe controls you.'

'Maybe, Doctor. But I still win.'

'You know who I am.'

'Everyone does. You're legend. You're chaos.'

'Maybe I should be order for a change. You know that I am a Time Lord.'

'You're the enemy.'

The Doctor glared at Kramer. 'By the authority of the High Council I order you to deactivate.' He was shouting now, bellowing at Kramer and at the Catastrophe. The drones looked on silently. 'Abandon your host and return to Gallifrey!'

Kramer laughed. 'It doesn't work, man.'

'Maybe not,' mused the Doctor. 'But this might.'

Kramer's body twisted as tentacles wrapped around it, breaking every bone. The Doctor stepped back neatly as Kramer's hands exploded into metal, then fell limp. The body collapsed.

Drummond emerged from the mass of shattered skin, his own tentacles folding back and knitting together ruined skin, a wide white grin on his face. 'Nice distraction.' His eyes sparkled. 'Sarah was right. You are a good guy.'

The Doctor turned. In the shadows, the drones were dying. Drummond turned to Andrew Cross. 'Get UNIT to Grover's warehouse.

You'll see when you get there.' Cross nodded, and walked away. 'Take the car.'

'So, Doctor,' Stephen said. 'Is it over?'

The Doctor's face was grave. 'Far from it. The weapon is powerless without a host. But there is a ship in orbit. One of the finest in the Time Lord fleet.'

'Is it dangerous?'

'Dangerous? Dangerous? Of course it's dangerous.' He looked up to the sky. Between the storm clouds they could see the stars. 'That ship is legend. My people travel through time, Mr Keane, but they cannot interact with the past or future of their homeworld. But sometimes we hear echoes of our own futures.'

'And that ship...'

'...is notorious.'

'Why are you looking up?' Stephen asked.

'I can see it.' Keane followed his gaze, but there was nothing. 'I can feel it moving through time towards us.'

'Why is it notorious, then?'

'They say it led a mission for my people. One which broke all the laws of time in a desperate gamble to keep a deadly secret.'

Stephen stared at him. 'This is it, isn't it? This is that mission. We're stuck in the middle of it. The fleet came, and...'

'...it destroyed the Earth. Millions of years before it was due. The legend has been around since I was young.'

'What's the ship called?'

The Doctor looked up. Above, the storm clouds were swirling, and lightning flashed in the upper air.

'The *Korominas*.'

'Can we stop it?' Sarah asked. 'I've seen 1980 destroyed once...'

'Not unless I can persuade the Time Lords to call it off. The question is, do they trust me?'

'They trust me.'

The voice came from behind them. A black-suited figure with crystal eyes.

'It's you,' said Drummond. 'The other time-sensitive.'

'My name is Mr Comnicos. Hello, Doctor. I've wanted to meet you for a long time.'

The Doctor shook his hand. 'A pleasure. I take it you're here on behalf of the Time Lords?'

'Yes. Even by talking to you I'm interfering. But the situation was out of control.'

'It still is out of control. This planet is about to be destroyed.'

Comnicos closed his eyes. 'Not any more,' he said. 'I've closed my report. The High Council should lift the temporal barriers around this planet. But there are likely to be Time Lord agents swarming here soon, so you may want to take your leave now.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Good idea. But there's something not right yet.'

'Yes,' said Stephen. 'You said something about a paradox. The Catastrophe said the same.'

'What's a paradox?' asked Drummond.

'An impossibility in time,' said the Doctor. 'If you were to go back and kill yourself, that would cause a paradox. They're very dangerous. The host body the Catastrophe tried to adopt was just such a paradox. That's why its transference went wrong. That's what trapped it. The life it tried to usurp was an impossible one. A quirk in time...'

Stephen was staring at him. 'It's me, isn't it?'

The Doctor nodded. 'I'm rather afraid it is. You're the paradox. You're the one who disabled the Catastrophe.'

'Let me guess. The web of time, or something. This was supposed to be police business. Not another Devil's End, another Llanfairfach. But you're here, there's no way out. I have to go back and kill myself.'

'I wish there were some other way.'

'So do I. I just wanted to get home. But it's personal now. Even if I could walk away I could never forget.' He laughed. 'Saving the world. What a way to end my career. My life.'

'I'm sorry.'

There were tears in Stephen's eyes. 'I got caught in a conspiracy, another one of your adventures. I always knew there'd be no way out.'

'We can trace the path of the Catastrophe,' the Doctor said. 'I can take you back in my TARDIS.'

'Thank you,' said Stephen. 'I dream about it sometimes. A street,

music, a blinding light. Almost like a memory. A man without a face...'

The Doctor reached down and took the glittering crystal of the Control Device from Kramer's hand. 'Use this. The psychic trauma should shut down his - your - mind. He - you - won't feel anything.' The crystal shone, every colour of the rainbow glowing beautifully. 'I can give you an image phase shifter to disguise your appearance.'

'We'll remember you,' said Sarah. 'We promise.'

She hugged him. After a moment Stephen realised they'd only just met.

'Where's Drummond?' the Doctor asked.

'He's gone,' Sarah replied. 'Says he'll find his own way back.'

The Doctor looked up to the skies. They were clearer now. Above, lights were moving. The *Korominas* approaching the Earth.

'This doesn't feel like an ending,' he said. 'And I don't feel like a good guy at all.'

They walked back to the TARDIS together.

London: 29 July 1960

Danziger Street was long, empty. Tarmac and pavement, stretching away into the shadowless afternoon light. To either side, the rows of terraced houses stood, curtains closed against the heat

The boy stood at the end of the road. The *middle* of the road, enjoying the thrill of the forbidden, the unnerving, mute silence. The heat had driven people indoors.

Today, he would have an adventure.

Once, he had thought adventures were things that happened only in faraway places, impossible storybook lands of singing cities and fiery skies, where wizards and knights fought monsters to rescue fair maidens. Not here, in Great Britain, where it rained; in London, where the last hint of the unknown had been the new families from the West Indies. The city took the colours of the world and blended them all to grey.

The boy began to walk. Slowly, one step at a time, hard leather shoes tapping against the dry road. At the far end was a wall with a gate.

Today, adventure had come to him. He was ten years old now, far too grown-up to believe in wizards and monsters. But that didn't mean he couldn't still believe in adventures. It just meant he had to make them for himself.

Maybe that's what being grown-up means, he thought. Stopping listening to other people's adventures, and starting to have your own.

He was going to be a policeman, like his dad. Fighting terrorists and communists and all those other mysterious figures who crept around the edges of the grown-up world with their bombs and their guns. Policemen were good; they protected people.

He reached the wall. The street behind him was still empty, the sun sliding over its diamond-hard edges. Ahead, the gate beckoned with its rusting joints.

For a moment he remembered that he should be at home. School had finished half an hour ago, and his mother would be worried sick. For a moment he wanted to go back, to turn away from the gate. But something in the heat and the sunshine prevented him.

He reached out, and pulled the gate open. He was expecting it to creak: old gateways always creaked. But it simply grated, rust against rust against skin, hot and uncomfortable as it touched his palm.

Beyond the wall was a park. He had been there dozens of times before, but never alone.

Today it was empty, and unbearably hot. The swings were still, the old patterns of dust on the ground near the sandpit baked dry and undisturbed. There were no shadows. The grass was a patch of greying thorns between four high brick walls. Here was adventure. He could feel it, squeezing itself out of the walls, out of its old dry hiding-places. Coming to the city. Looking for him.

Somewhere, in one of the streets that converged here, music was playing. Tinny music, radio music. But the stifling heat twisted it, boiling it and turning into something new, different strange. Sound and echo danced together in the boy's ears. It was impossible, beautiful.

He walked over to the swings, slowly. He gave the chain a push, watching it rock and twist, disturbing the stillness in the park's bright enclosure. He loved the way the seat moved, uncertainly, randomly. The way the smallest push could set so many different parts in motion:

chain pushing seat pushing chain, until the whole frame shuddered. Today was a day for the unexpected, a day in the sun, when everything had consequences, as if the whole world had solidified in the heat and was pressing in on him. As if the air were turning into hard, solid, real adventure.

Then he noticed the man. He was sitting on the bench that stood by the park's far wall. Motionless. Watching the boy.

Black. The stranger was wearing black. His whole body was wrapped in it, thick dark material of some sort, each item of clothing indistinguishable from the next, as if all the shadows in the world had gathered around him.

The boy stared. Even in his shorts and light cotton shirt he was hot. For the stranger it should have been unbearable. But he seemed not to notice, not even sitting under the early afternoon sun, surrounded by the shimmering heat haze that hid his face and made his features invisible.

The air around him stirred, thick like the steam above a kettle. Drawing the boy's eye, making him return the stare. Making contact.

He moved closer, the toecaps of his shoes turning over the dust, revealing darker layers beneath. This was wrong; it was dangerous. But adventures were supposed to be dangerous. Adventures were about doing what you shouldn't, about going where you would never normally go. Seeing things you would never normally see. And this man was pure adventure. His stillness in the fury of the heat haze made him look like he had been formed from the air and the grass, like the figure of Adam in the boy's illustrated Bible. Or like the serpent, calling him over, daring him to break the rules, to *talk to strangers...*

The boy turned round, looked back for a second. But the edges of the park were shimmering with haze, the swings and the road and his house becoming less and less real. So he turned back to the man.

Even standing next to the bench, less than three feet away from the stranger, his face was no clearer. It seemed to shift under his gaze like a faded memory. Once again, the impression of black clothes, maybe pale skin. A closed fist resting on his lap. And the stare, held on the boy at the end of the bench.

'Hello,' the boy said, staring at his shoes. It was all he could think of. It was the sort of thing you said to houseguests, or churchgoers on Sunday. The sort of word he used every day. But now it seemed foreign.

Then he looked up, and tried to fix a stare on the man's face. But there was nothing there. Just a vague area, rippling and distorting behind that same, impossible haze. Looking back at him without eyes.

For a moment he panicked. He was alone, trapped in a shimmering heat with an impossible man, a nightmare man.

A man with no face.

He wanted his mother, he wanted his home and his tea and he didn't want to be here...

But the man had uncurled his fist, and in it was something strange and beautiful, light flooding his mind. And in that instant - as the light and the heat and the haze spread as far as he could see, and the strange music rose to a crescendo - he knew he could never go back.

While Stocks Last

JAMES POTTER

There was something comforting about mirrors.

Admittedly, it was nice, if unsurprising, when people commented on how good one looked, but there was nothing quite like evaluating for yourself. Mirrors couldn't lie. If you had warts, they showed warts. If you had crow's feet around your eyes, they showed the invisible bird's footprints as it stalked all over your face. And as for wrinkles...

And those who were beautiful merely had it confirmed, as if they needed it. And while Shiffer knew that he was incredibly handsome, and never objected to people (mostly women) telling him so, he liked to confirm it every morning before work. That way, he could feel confidant about going out and showing his face, safe in the knowledge that the world would love him just as it had the previous day. And the one before that. And the one before that.

Shiffer's hand mirror was his pride and joy. It was ergonomically designed to fit into the palm of his hand and his hand only, its smooth chrome surface slipping into place over his fingers. Despite the numerous mirrors adorning the walls of his boudoir, he would be quite lost without it.

This was why Shiffer's attention was fixed on the mirror in his hand, rather than the one on the dressing table opposite. Or the ones on the various walls. Shiffer's apartment was a case-study in the excesses of luxury, the furniture made with the finest materials and designed for maximum comfort and pleasure. One or two chairs hung from the ceiling (in which a number of soft lights glowed) but Shiffer never sat when he could help it. He preferred to recline, and the bed that had pride of place in the centre of the room stood testimony to this. Its velvety-purple colours matched the pale pastels of the walls, the fine silk of the covers shone in the light. It was untidy, but not in a slobbish manner. Merely in a way that suggested it was often in use. And by more than one person.

'Dill,' he called and watched with a smile as Dill, his attaché and confidant, came running to his side from the rest-room, where he had been adjusting his own features.

Dill wasn't ugly, but neither was he as handsome as Shiffer. His make-up brought out the best of his face, which would otherwise be quite dull and plain. Shiffer was in the process of trying to educate Dill in the ways of charm and seduction (two subjects Shiffer had mastered years ago), and while his protégé's sensibilities were a little coarser than his tutor's, Dill had been a quick study and picked up the basics quite well. Shiffer feared, however, that for Dill the enjoyment, the pleasure, would always be in the consummation and not the chase itself (something Shiffer infinitely preferred - what happened afterwards merely confirmed his skill).

Dill approached and sat down beside his master. 'Yes, Shiffer?'

'What is the time?'

Dill checked an elaborate analogue chronometer that hung on a wall. 'Ten to opening.'

Shiffer sighed and flicked a lock of bronze hair away from his face. 'Then it is time we were on our way.' He rose, Dill rising with him.

'Would you like to peruse the monitors first,' Dill asked, indicating the wall of screens, 'or go straight to the morning stroll around the mall?'

Shiffer thought for a moment and looked at first the monitors, then the door.

'A stroll, I think,' he answered finally, 'I'm in the mood for something quite particular.'

Dill smiled at the suggestion of a hunt. 'Really? May I enquire what it will be?'

Shiffer tapped a password into a keypad by the door, which slid open. 'I'm bored with the normal types. I want something different, something that stands out.'

They walked through the door and onto a long balcony that stretched as far as the eye could see, both left and right. Above them, clouds obscured the ludicrously high roof (in fact, it hadn't been entirely proven that there was one). And in the space past the safety barrier, a mass of platforms, lifts and escalators; an Escher on hallucinogenics.

The air was alive with a buzzing, humming noise - the sound of a hundred thousand voices all talking to each other. People moved along the carrydors like insects - less than insects. Like the fleas that infest a dog.

'Might be difficult,' Dill commented, 'You know what they're like round here.'

'No, I can feel it in my bones, Dill.' Shiffer leaned forward against the handrail and looked out across the bustling metropolis. 'Somewhere, somewhere out there, I will find what I'm looking for.' He turned to his assistant. 'After all, we do say we have 'something for everyone'.'

'Well, what do you think?'

As she watched her friend from the opposite (and therefore safer) side of the console room, Peri, the Doctor's young American travelling companion, didn't know quite what to think. The last time the Doctor had suggested a little outing to cheer her up she'd had the scars for days.

The Doctor had taken her to Veetle XVI, a planet where, in his own words, it was 'possible for even the heaviest creature to fly like a bird'. It was something to do with the atmospherics, Peri hadn't quite understood it. Anyway, at least she'd managed to glide for a bit before scraping a landing. The Doctor had, with ill grace, plummeted like something that had realised its natural state was being on the ground and wished to achieve it as quickly as possible. The locals had blamed his waistline, an accusation the Doctor angrily refuted, even after four more disastrous attempts.

So it was with more than a little trepidation that Peri asked what he had in mind this time.

The Doctor idly scratched his head and wiped a finger across the humming control console.

'Well,' he started, 'the TARDIS needs a new ambidriomorphic, multi-phased mabdomameter - and a couple of elastic bands - I could do with a couple of new waistcoats and you definitely need some shirts that actually fit, so I was thinking that maybe we could -'

'Do some shopping!' Peri finished the Doctor's sentence and jumped

with delight.

The Doctor was rather taken aback by his companion's enthusiastic response. 'I take it that meets with your approval?'

Peri shot him a grin. 'Does it? Doctor, I was *born* in a mall.'

The Doctor leaned forward across the console, his curiosity piqued. 'Really? I thought you were born in Pasadena?'

Peri considered explaining but decided against it. He would only start complaining about Americans again anyway. 'So where is it?'

The Doctor frowned. 'What? Pasadena?'

Peri counted to ten and slowly walked round to the Doctor's side of the console. 'The *mall*. You know, where we're going to shop?' She waved a hand in front of the Time Lord's face.

'What? Oh yes,' the Doctor responded as if he'd forgotten (which he probably had) and then his face lit up and he threw his arms out expansively. 'The biggest shopping complex in the galaxy: the planet Ouiselstarph in the Pleblionic Sector.'

Peri stuck out her tongue. 'Yuck. What a terrible name.'

The Doctor appeared to be affronted. Probably wanted me to be more impressed, Peri figured.

'Well, I'm sure you'll be more appreciative of its slogan,' he told her, flicking switches on the console.

'What's that?'

The Doctor paused in his programming and looked at her. '"Shop till you drop",' he said, in what Peri thought was a poor imitation of her voice. But she smiled nonetheless.

'Now that sounds more like it.'

From the very beginning, the planet Ouiselstarph had been designed to be the biggest precinct of its kind. An artificial planetoid, it was the largest of its class (Type C) and the shopping complex itself took up roughly ninety percent of its surface area. The rest were offices, storage space and living quarters, although most staff tended to commute in from the surrounding planets. It was so large, the other planets in its system had been moved to avoid it interfering with their orbits. It featured so many lights that it could be seen by the naked eye light-years away. It blazed like a small sun onto its artificial moons.

The size of a shopping precinct can always be told from the size of its parking facilities. Ouiselstarph had been given thirty-two artificial satellites (one for each letter of the local alphabet) and each one was nothing more than a parking lot for the punters' space pods, capsules and shuttles. Unlike the planet itself, no attempt had been made to liven up the moons and so they hung in space, grey and lifeless, connected to their bright parent only by the teleport beams that flowed between them.

The TARDIS materialised, with what sounded like a great deal of effort, on Moon '§', which was between Moons '◊' and 'H'. A few seconds afterwards the door of the police box opened and Peri emerged. She blinked in the bright light from Ouiselstarph, reached into her pocket and produced a pair of sunglasses which she slid onto her face.

The Doctor came out behind her and locked the Tardis door.

'Is that it?' Peri asked, pointing - but not looking - at the planet above them.

The Doctor didn't reply, instead he rummaged around in the pockets of his distastefully coloured coat and pulled out a transparent red sunshade with an elasticated headband. Peri watched him put it on in sartorial disgust.

'There!' he said, smiling at his companion, oblivious to the face she was making.

A question bubbled to the surface of Peri's mind, a question she'd been trying to ignore for fear it would ruin her day.

'How are we going to pay for anything?' she asked.

The Doctor raised a triumphant finger. 'Aha!' he exclaimed and reached into his pockets again.

This time he took out a bundle of tissue paper and when he unwrapped it, Peri could make out two slivers of... what? Skin! The Doctor gingerly handed one to her.

'Put it on your thumb, print side up.' Peri did as instructed placing the new print over her right thumb. The Doctor did the same to his left thumb with the other sliver.

'Banking is more secure in this part of the galaxy,' he explained. 'For every person a print is taken from some, unique, part of their body. On

payment for goods received, the print is scanned. The image is sent across the banking network instantly and your account is debited accordingly. Likewise, if you wished to extend your credit, you would connect to the network, request the increase and the information regarding your print would be adjusted. No bureaucracy, no time wasted.' The Doctor gazed at their grey surroundings. Everywhere he looked was dull and lacked colour. The air was full with the smell of fuel and vehicles parked in matrices stretched to the horizon. 'And no bank managers.'

'But if the payment is instant, won't they realise that I haven't got an account?' Peri asked, her mind filling with images of being locked away in an alien jail for the rest of her life.

'Oh there's no need to worry, Peri,' the Doctor told her throwing an arm round his friend's shoulders. 'These are, in a manner of speaking, 'blank cheques'. You can put what you want on them and we won't be billed, someone else will.'

Peri looked up at him. 'Who?'

The Doctor grinned. 'The High Council of Time Lords on Gallifrey.'

Peri laughed and playfully poked the Doctor in the chest. 'That's extremely cheeky, Doctor.'

'Well,' the Doctor replied, straightening his posture, 'I am the President of the High Council. Besides,' he added, 'they ow me. Come on.'

The Doctor led Peri off down the grey driveway, pass various models of spaceship.

'I'm so lucky to know someone so important,' Peri commented, her voice heavy with irony.

The Doctor ignored it. 'I'm glad you've finally realised.' he replied.

Five minutes later and, as far as Peri could tell, they hadn't got anywhere.

'Just where are we supposed to be going?'

The Doctor pointed ahead. In the distance, Peri could see a concrete shelter, walled off on three sides by high wire fencing.

'Oh good.' She sighed, uninspired. 'Just so long as I know.'

She spent the next. couple of minutes trying hard not to pick at her

new thumbprint, which was starting to itch.

'Doctor?'

'Mmm?'

'If you can use any print of the body, why did you choose thumbs?'

The Doctor glanced at his friend in irritation. 'My dear girl, I doubt you would have preferred having to pay with your buttocks.'

Peri stopped and frowned at the Doctor's back, not really sure if her companion was joking or not.

Another five minutes, and Peri could see more detail as they approached their destination. The shelter was a little bigger than she had first thought. The floor was covered in black ceramic tiles, and what looked like futuristic chrome shower units lined the walls, each jutting out in a pyramid shape. The Doctor walked in first, and immediately moved to study a poster on the far wall.

'What's that?' On closer inspection, she could see that it wasn't a poster after all, but a flat screen displaying text and pictures.

'Very simple controls,' the Doctor explained, hitting a square on the screen. The text and images changed. 'Just select where you wish to go and press the appropriate part of the screen.' He reached towards his waistcoat pocket. 'Now, we'll meet back here -'

The Doctor stopped and sighed. His fob watch wasn't there. It had been an accident, Peri had apologised and the Doctor had told her not to worry about it. Nevertheless, the young woman couldn't help but feel that the Doctor hadn't yet come to terms with his loss. The watch had meant more to him than he was willing to let on and it made Peri feel even guiltier to think that was because he *didn't* want her to feel guilty.

'We'll meet back here *later*,' the Doctor finished, almost managing to keep the traces of grumpiness from his voice. He reached forward and pressed a part of the screen.

'Where are you going?' Peri asked, leaning forward to see.

'Oh, nowhere interesting,' the Doctor said hurriedly, 'Electronics, spare parts, around there. Somewhere.'

Peri smiled. Looking over his shoulder, she could see the display proudly announcing: TOYS.

The Doctor stepped onto the centre of the floor and waved. 'Have

fun.'

The shower units on the walls started to hum and glow orange. Still waving, the Doctor started wobbling then disappeared.

Peri reached into her pocket and felt the round metal thing she had put there before they'd left the TARDIS. Pulling the object out of her pocket, she examined the ornate, swirling pattern on its case and the vile green chain that dangled from it. Maybe this time *she* could cheer *him* up.

Peri started to look on the display for anywhere that did watch repairs.

The white transit aura dissipated and the Doctor glanced round his new environment. As expected, it was full of noise and colour. The clamouring of a thousand shades of blues, greens, reds and yellows - he realised it was probably the only place in the universe where his coat actually blended in with the surroundings. Here and next to a painting by Jackson Pollock, anyway.

As he attempted to stand still in the midst of the chaos and make sense of it all, he was barged by a group of excited children, who rushed past him and had disappeared into the crowds before he could instil some manners into them. Tutting at the conduct of youth, the Doctor started exploring.

He passed the electronic toys and was surprised at what he saw. Some children were plugged into the latest in Actual Reality sensor-nets, but others were huddled around two-dimensional displays, joypads in hand, their arms swaying one way then the other as they attempted to perfect control of whatever it was on on the screen. The Doctor mulled over the coming and going of fashions as he continued on his way.

He smiled in greeting as he passed two adults, both dressed as famous toy characters, who were giving out stickers and promotional material to the small groups clustered round them.

The latest in toy soldiers received nothing but a look of disgust, but their alien enemies drew more attention. The Doctor laughed as he looked closer.

'Ridiculous,' he snorted, 'Who's ever heard of an alien that looks like

a Walrus?'

Shaking his head, he turned and headed away but stopped.

In the distance, he could hear a mechanical chattering. Tiny mechanisms moved under power as something started pulling away from its stop and continuing on its journey. A sampled whooping noise confirmed his suspicions and he pictured fake grass, with miniature hills and local branch lines.

The Doctor smiled, knowing he'd found what he was after.

Shiffer and Dill had moved to their favourite point in the complex. It allowed them to see almost everything, the view was quite exhilarating.

This point was central to the mall. Here, the walkways in between shops and stores widened to allow for a large hole in the centre. Looking down, they could see the floor below. Through a similar hole, they could see the floor below that, and so on until the vision swam and became muddied in its own tiny detail. The hole stretched quite a distance, and there was nothing the pair liked better than to watch the punters walk past and make comments.

For the men, they would comment on their lack of taste and style, the plainness of their features or the shortcomings of their physical attributes. The women were a different matter. They would be graded, marked and assessed. If they were deemed worthwhile, they would be invited back to the boudoir.

Today had been very quiet.

'It's a problem,' Shiffer complained.

'What is?' Dill asked, his gaze not leaving the people walking below them.

'Fashion.'

Dill found this a curious statement, coming from the man who had taught him so much about that very subject. 'In what way?'

Shiffer stretched lazily and turned his back on the throng. 'It helps people in bringing out the best of their looks, their talents,' he explained, 'But it becomes such a cult that when you try to find something different, everybody's the same.'

Dill nodded sympathetically. 'I do know what you mean. Everyone who comes here is the fashionable shape of the year.' He waved a

hand to indicate parts of his body. 'Thin here, sallow there, droopy everywhere else.'

Shiffer grunted in agreement.

'But don't give up yet sir,' Dill argued, 'You still might find someone with just what you want.'

Shiffer scowled. 'What, in that herd of sheep? No, it looks like I shall have to return to the suite and entertain myself.'

Dill retreated from the railing and prepared to leave. 'Well, naturally, I'll do whatever I - wait a minute. Shiffer look, down there.'

Shiffer turned quickly as Dill pointed excitedly down towards the floor below.

'Where?' he demanded, 'I don't see...'

And then he sharply inhaled as he spotted what Dill was pointing at.

She was perfect.

She was young and had a wonderfully innocent and naive look about her. Cropped brunette hair brought out her eyes... and as for her shape... no sheep here... She was wearing blue shorts, revealing legs that, perhaps, lacked length and her knotted shirt left Shiffer's imagination running overtime in an attempt to perfectly visualise the rest.

He was aware of Dill dabbing at his mouth with a silk handkerchief. He frowned, puzzled.

'You were drooling,' Dill explained. 'Is she the one?'

'Oh most definitely,' Shiffer affirmed with a hoarse whisper. 'No sheep this pretty one... she won't immediately give in like the others. Such a challenge.'

'And such rewards at the end,' Dill added, his eyes transfixed.

Shiffer glanced at his subordinate. 'Dill, you're becoming lascivious. Stop it.'

Dill's eyes dropped to the floor. 'My apologies. What if she is here with someone?'

'You know the rules, Dill,' Shiffer reminded him, 'If lost property isn't claimed within twenty-four hours...'

Peri had to admit that this was like no mall she'd ever visited. The scale of the place was almost beyond comprehension and she had no idea

whether she was going in anything remotely resembling the right direction.

She had been loathe to refer to one of the numerous, handily-placed maps that were placed here and there along the carrydors, determined to find her own way about. After all, what sort of space traveller was she if she had to go running to a street map every time she found herself on an alien planet?

But this was worse than any alien planet. Even alien planets had a sense of structure about them, the design of their buildings following some logic. But this place had, it seemed, no reasoning behind it - the carrydors sprawled endlessly in all three dimensions, there was no focus or sense of direction. In fact, she could almost swear that some of the escalators worked the wrong way up, carrying people who were hanging from their feet.

Admit it, Peri, she told herself, you've been beaten.

With a sigh, she left the constantly moving floor, fought through the mass of people passing by and moved to the nearest map. And then, to her despair, found that it would offer no help whatsoever.

Imagine a map of the London Underground. Now take a second map of the same, turn it upside-down and lay it over the top. Now translate it into a three-dimensional image.

The map Peri was staring at was worse.

It was holographic, and offered controls to turn the map full-circle in 'x', 'y' and 'z'. For customers experiencing temporal difficulties it was also possible to revolve the map in a further fifteen dimensions. None of which helped Peri in the slightest and she moaned audibly.

'How on earth am I supposed to read that?' she complained, 'Do I need special glasses or an eye implant or something?'

There was a discrete cough from behind her.

'My delightful young lady, may I be of some service?'

The voice was smooth. Too smooth. The Doctor would probably have described it as 'unctuous' or 'obsequious'. Bracing herself for some slime-ball, Peri turned.

And had to fight hard not to laugh.

The man who had spoken had bronze hair, was wearing leather trousers and what looked like an old naval jacket, with metal clasps

and frilly pads on the shoulders. A slightly shorter, blonde man stood behind him, wearing wide cloth trousers and a huge silk shirt that billowed in the air conditioning. His waist and his forehead were tied with red material. The smaller man was plain looking, but Peri had to admit that the one who had spoken to her was quite cute. Both were wearing lipstick and eye shadow.

Something fought to the surface of Peri 's thoughts, but she ignored it.

The one who had addressed her bowed. 'My name is Shiffer and this shy, retiring gentlemen behind me is known as Dill.'

Peri nodded absently.

It was a song, bouncing about inside her head...

'May we offer our services?' Dill asked with a polite, but hollow, smile. The one called Shiffer glanced at him.

'Indeed,' he added quickly, 'We were passing and you appeared to be in some distress.'

'Well, I am kind of lost,' Peri explained slowly, only half-aware of what they were saying.

Her name is something, and she somethings something else...

'Well, maybe we could help you find what it is you are looking for,' Shiffer offered and then gasped, theatrically. 'But you look tired and fed-up. You are in need of relaxation and a little light indulgence.'

Shiffer coaxed an arm round Peri' s shoulders and begun to lead her away from the map. The young woman didn't react, she seemed miles away.

Shiffer raised an eyebrow at Dill - this was far too easy.

'I have a room where we can be left quite alone, I promise,' he added.

Her name is Rio and she -

The two men were taken by surprise as Peri laughed.

'Yes, of course!' she giggled, triumphantly.

Shiffer shared Dill another glance. Dill was twirling a finger at the side of his head.

'Well, if you'd just come with me, then...' Shiffer started to lead Peri away.

'What?' Peri demanded, stopping dead. 'Where are you taking me?'

Shiffer frowned. 'Why, up to my boudoir, of course.'

For a moment, Peri didn't know what to say - her jaw dropped but nothing came out. Then she finally overcame shock. She shrugged off his arm.

'Leave me alone you creep!' she yelled, not disturbing a single passer-by - they went about their business without so much as sparing her a glance. 'I'll call security,' she threatened.

'I wouldn't bother.' It was Dill who replied.

Peri spun round to face him, only to find his nose buried in her chest.

'We are security,' Dill continued.

Peri let out a strangled cry and quickly stepped back from Pair.

'Security?' she spat, 'You're nothing but a pair of - of --perverted New Romantics!'

Dill and Shiffer looked at each other in confusion. They had never encountered a woman with such strong nature before, and were uncertain how to react. Dill reached over and pulled Shiffer towards him.

'What do we do?' he whispered quickly.

'Save face, make a retreat and re-think our strategy,' Shiffer whispered back, then turned to Peri.

'My dear lady,' he said smoothly, 'All we wished for was your delightful company, but if you wish to carry on with your shopping that's fine. But at the very least tell me your name.'

There was almost a plea in Shiffer's voice and Peri didn't have to try hard to ignore it. However, they *could* help...

'All right you guys,' she told them, hoping her voice carried the same sort of authority as the Doctor's. 'Here's what we'll do. I'll tell you my name if you help me first.'

Dill's eyes narrowed. 'What do you want?'

'I just want to know where I can go to get a watch repaired. That's all,' Peri told them.

Shiffer referred to the map for a few seconds, and then pointed in the direction Peri had come from. 'If you go along there and up the first travelator then you can't miss it. It's a big shop that says 'watch

repairs' on the front. Terribly gaudy sign.' he added.

'Right. Thanks.' Peri sighed - finally she was getting somewhere. 'Why is this place so complicated anyway?'

Shiffer gestured expansively with his hands. It was something the Doctor did quite often, Peri deciding it had something to do with his theatrical nature.

'Ouiselstarph,' Shiffer explained, 'is designed for maximum comfort and ease of use. From any given outlet it is possible to reach any other outlet via a direct route, meaning that customers can shop in whatever order they like. A most agreeable choice that allows for much variation and freedom of movement.'

'Oh, absolutely,' Dill opined.

'Yeah,' Peri replied, her voice heavy. 'Right.'

She began to walk away in the direction Shiffer indicated.

'Your name!' Shiffer called after her, 'You agreed!'

Peri turned, but continued walking away. 'Perpugilliam Brown. My friends call me Peri, so you can call me Perpugilliam .'

Shiffer watched Peri as she turned and headed away. He continued to stare long after she was lost in the crowds.

'What now?' Dill asked.

'I'm not done yet,' Shiffer muttered, 'I shall just find another way of persuading dear Perpugilliam to visit my bedchamber.' He turned and Dill stepped back from his intense stare. 'But she will be mine. Oh yes, she will be mine...'

The Doctor shook his head as he passed through the door. For a moment he had felt slightly dizzy, which wasn't like him at all.

Then again, he considered, his current incarnation - which was admittedly not the most stable he'd had - had probably fainted and passed out more times than most. It was quite disappointing really, as the Doctor had just recently started to convince himself that his new persona had now settled in and taken root.

Waving away such annoying thoughts, he looked around the electronics store. It wasn't a large store by any means, dealing as it did in more specialist equipment. Shelves displayed boxes, which in turn tried to make rather dull bits of hardware look as exciting as

possible. A few bins dotted the floor here and there, offering 'Bargain Boards' and 'Cheap Chips'.

Customer Assistants were conspicuous by their absence. Come to think of it, so were customers.

'Hello?' the Doctor called, 'Anyone there?'

No one jumped out from behind presentation stands. No one jumped up from below the counter.

'Come in sir,' the Doctor muttered gruffly, walking further in and glancing around in puzzlement. 'Look around sir, try what you like sir.' The Doctor considered the open door. 'Clean us out, sir.' he added.

He crossed to the counter, intent on checking whether the till was open. At that moment he heard a quiet shuffle somewhere behind him.

Spinning round, the Doctor was just in time to spot a large male carrying a number of boxes dart towards a side door.

'Excuse me?' he asked. The hulking man, ignoring him, quickly walked through the door.

'Oi' the Doctor yelled and gave chase.

Had he bothered to look behind the counter, the Doctor would have found an acne-riddled youth on the floor, unconscious. But he didn't, which was a pity, as if he had events that were to follow would not have been quite so surprising.

As he followed the passageway behind the door, he passed other doors which, the Doctor assumed, lead to other shops and outlets. The corridor, which was wide with a very high ceiling, was obviously leading to the loading bay, which serviced all the shops on this particular promenade due to the lack of space. The air got a little colder as he moved slowly away from the controlled atmosphere of the shopping complex. A faint hum grew louder the further he walked and the Doctor eventually recognised it as the engine of a SpaceMaster series 3 in tick-over mode.

The corridor ended in a large, corrugated sliding door which was open just wide enough for someone to walk through. Standing in the doorway, hidden in shadow, the Doctor watched as a group of well-toned men with ugly expressions loaded various containers and boxes into the SpaceMaster, which was sat on a landing pad, humming to itself and looking out into space. He tutted.

'Shoplifting with illusions of grandeur,' he muttered, 'Well we can't have that, can we?'

The Doctor paused, briefly. Did he need a plan?

He shook his head. Deciding that, if it came down to it, he could probably improvise, the Doctor strode purposefully into the centre of the landing bay.

'Right!' he shouted, his voice echoing off the high walls of the expansive chamber. The heavies all turned to look at him. 'You're nicked!' the Doctor added.

And there was a sharp pain on the back of his head.

As he fell to the ground and blackness swelled in his vision, the Doctor mentally kicked himself and decided that next time, he would *definitely* have a plan.

Shiffer paced up and down the boudoir with a great deal of anger. To think! His advances had been rejected. Him, of all people!

He spun to glare at Dill. 'Me! Of all people!'

Dill was sat in front of a wall of security monitors (which were more usually hidden behind mirrors). There was little else to do but their job, and he had been checking the images for any odd goings-on - half-heartedly, it had to be said - since they got back. 'I thought you said you wanted someone with a bit of spirit?' he asked and turned, his eyes glad to leave the screens.

Shiffer stopped pacing and scowled at his subordinate. 'All I wanted was a little life, a little fire. A little *hunger*. Not a revolutionary! The aim, if you remember, was to actually get her up here.'

Dill sighed. 'I hadn't forgotten.'

Shiffer allowed himself to fall onto the luxurious bed. The semi-sentient mattress responded by rippling up and down in a highly relaxing manner. Shiffer allowed himself a smile.

'You know,' he said, 'It's at moments like these that I'm really quite glad the Nestenes decided to diversify.' He purred in delight as the bed massaged his back, easing the tension in his shoulders.

The mattress responded as it had been programmed, creating relaxing movements. But it was biding its time. Soon the signal would be sent and this humanoid, along with all the other inferior creatures

in the complex would be nothing more than willing servants of the Nestenes, food for the gestalt and the templates for an army of Autons that would use this complex as a base for tearing through the galaxy, absorbing the energy of all the planets they encountered. Soon now... very soon...

'Ahh.' Shiffer sighed as the bed's movements became more excited. 'Miss Brown, Miss Brown. What are we to do with you?'

'She trusted our directions, even if she didn't trust us,' Dill commented, his eyes fixed on one monitor in particular.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I can see her - she's on camera four-point-two-point-ten.' Dill pointed.

Shiffer rose from the bed, which was always difficult. It always felt as if it didn't want to let go. 'Let me see.'

On the monitor Dill was pointing to, a full-colour, high-definition image of Perpugilliam Brown which could be seen walking out of a shop. There was a gaudy sign over the door saying 'watch repairs'. As the pair observed her, she smiled triumphantly at an old watch in her hand, then placed it in a pocket.

'Well, at least we'll have the recording,' Shiffer commented sadly, 'but it's just not the same.'

Dill narrowed his eyes. Shiffer knew that look. It meant a sneaky thought was forming.

'That smile; the watch secretly placed in the pocket. Bit suspicious, I'd say,' Dill remarked.

Shiffer perched on the arm of Dill's chair and leant closer. 'You would?'

'Oh yes,' Dill told him, 'With evidence like this, anyone would think that she'd stolen that watch.'

Shiffer's voice lowered to a whisper. 'They would?'

'Oh yes,' Dill continued, 'And I think that we'd be only doing our duty if we investigated, or at least detained Miss Brown for inquiries. Don't you?'

Shiffer straightened up and looked at Dill in something akin to admiration. Dill started to laugh - a snorting, choking noise - and Shiffer

added his, more melodious, tones to the cacophony.

'Dill,' he announced, 'I'm afraid that Miss Perpugilliam Brown is under suspicion of theft and will have to be detained for questioning.'

Dill rose and rubbed his hands together. 'What a pity sir,' he said, 'Any special instructions?'

'Just one.' Shiffer looked down at Dill and his smile grew to twice its original length. 'Prepare the handcuffs.'

'I think he's coming round, Boss.'

The Doctor only vaguely made out what was being said. His eyes were slowly opening, his brain was slowly starting to work again. But only slowly. The back of his head was throbbing, and the pain wasn't an incentive to jump up and take charge of the situation.

'Hnngh?' he murmured, hoping that it sounded witty and incisive.

His eyes could now make out a blobby pink mass ahead of him. Fearing his second capture by the Master Brains of Telteron III in as many weeks, the Doctor started to panic. As his eyes focused however, he realised that what he thought was one of the most sadistic blobs of intellectual matter this side of the Crab Nebula was, in fact, merely a nasty piece of work who was built like a brick outhouse. And she had facial hair.

'Is this what you call customer care?' he demanded, trying to put as much energy into the question as possible.

The bearded lady was not impressed. 'He sounds a bit cheeky, don't he Mister Gromm?' The question was aimed towards someone who was standing behind the Doctor. As he twisted to see what this 'Mister Gromm' looked like, he realised that he'd been tied to a chair, hands behind his back.

A large black beard flew into view from somewhere and growled. 'He'd better not be, for his sake. I don't like cheeky people.'

The large black beard was attached to an even larger man wearing ex-military combats.

'As a rule, neither do I,' the Doctor told him. 'I take it you are Mister... Gromm?'

The man nodded. 'That's right. I'm Gromm,' - he pointed towards the two men (and bearded woman) still loading the SpaceMaster -

'those are the lads,' - he pointed to a small man wearing his Sunday best and a bowler hat, who was sitting on a container picking his teeth with an eight-inch knife - 'and that's Benny the Egg.'

The Doctor stared at Benny the Egg. Benny the Egg stopped picking his teeth and stared back at the Doctor.

'May I ask, why...'

Before the Doctor could say any more, Benny had leapt across the space between them and had his knife up against the Doctor's throat.

'Don't ask,' he whispered, only slightly insanely. 'Don't ask 'cos I won't tell.'

The Doctor tried to remain calm. 'That's quite all right old chap,' he soothed, 'We all have secrets we like to keep.'

'How did you get past the subliminiser?' Gromm demanded. 'It was supposed to stop everyone going in while we cleared the stock out.'

'Ah well.' The Doctor tried to shrug. 'That's just one of my secrets, I'm afraid.'

Gromm appeared to boil red in an instant 'I told you I didn't like cheeky people!' he shouted.

The Doctor winced. 'Yes, I'm sorry, I forgot.'

Gromm leaned over the Doctor, who recoiled from formidable body odour.

'You see, I can be cheeky too,' Gromm informed him. 'For example, I can tell Benny here to cut off a couple of your fingers. He hasn't had much of an opportunity for a while.'

The Doctor glanced at Benny, who smiled politely back at him. 'Poor chap, I sympathise entirely.'

'You must understand that I don't want to hurt you, but if you keep being cheeky then I won't have no choice.' The mercy in Gromm's words was missing in his face.

'Well at least we agree on something,' the Doctor replied. 'Because *I* don't want you to hurt me either.'

'I'm glad we're in agreement,' Gromm said, doing little to actually sound glad. 'So, how did you get past the subliminiser?"

'Oh I don't know, maybe it was faulty,' the Doctor verbally waved the question away. 'What I want to know is how you can possibly consider

making a getaway in that thing.' He nodded at the SpaceMaster.

Gromm looked doubtfully at the spaceship. 'What's wrong with it?'

'What's wrong with it?' The Doctor smiled to himself. 'It's a jalopy, that's what's wrong. The series 3 SpaceMaster was put out to grass years ago. It's an antique.'

'What do you know about it?' Gromm asked, angry but curious.

'I happen to be an expert in such matters,' the Doctor informed his captor, modestly. 'The series 3 was prone to burnt linkages, it probably won't take off at all.'

Benny the Egg giggled nervously. Gromm snarled at Doctor. 'It got us here all right, didn't it?'

The Doctor's voice took on a despairing tone. 'Which is all very well, but if they give out when you're leaving then you're going to be stuck, aren't you? Hmm?'

'Are we?'

'Of course you are. Even worse, if the engines blew, which is highly possible, you'd have security down on you in no time all.'

The Doctor tried to relax and breathe normally. Thankfully, Gromm's knowledge of spacecraft was limited. Whichever military he'd been in had employed him for his brawn, rather than his brains.

The others had stopped loading and gathered to hear what the Doctor had to say.

'So what do we do about it?' Gromm asked, unsure of his position.

'Well,' the Doctor answered, addressing everyone now, not just Gromm. 'If you agree to let me go, I will look the ship over for you. Now I can't say fairer than that.'

The others seemed to consider the idea. Gromm's eyes narrowed. 'Why can't you do it from there?'

The Doctor strained in his chair, trying to get a good look at the vehicle. 'I can't see from here, it's too far away. I'll have to get closer.'

Gromm looked round at his gang. The two other men were looking a little worried, as was the bearded lady. Benny the Egg was looking in two directions at once.

'All right,' Gromm decided, and pointed at one of the men. 'You, cut him loose.'

The Doctor's bonds were severed and he stood up, massaging his

wrists.

Gromm moved close, until the Doctor's nose was almost touching his barrel-like chest, and looked down at the Time Lord.

'This had better not be a trick,' he rumbled, ''Cos that would be cheeky, and I'll set Benny onto you.'

Benny the Egg waved his knife at the Doctor.

'Brrrrooom,' he said with a happy smile.

The Doctor forced a grin in return. 'Let's get on, shall we?'

Peri's initial discomfort at the size of the complex had vanished. The achievement of getting the Doctor's watch fixed had cheered her up and she was now walking past the various outlets, window-shopping. Passing a store specialising in female eveningwear she had popped in, hoping to be able to try something on. However, she had found to her bemusement and disgust that a) the fashions were extremely dull and b) the sizes went no bigger than something fit for a child. Or stick insect.

The sales assistant had watched her struggle into something akin to a cocktail dress with a look on her face that said 'no, that's not going in, no matter where you push it'.

'I feel madam may be a bit too big for anything we have,' she had said, 'Perhaps madam should look for a range that caters for the larger woman.'

'Too big!' Peri exclaimed, 'My *bones* wouldn't fit through that sleeve, whether I dieted or not!' It hadn't escaped her attention that the assistant was rakishly thin and flat-chested.

She could hide behind a broom-handle and I wouldn't see her, Peri thought bitterly.

So, Peri had given up shopping for clothes - it wasn't the fashions that were the wrong shape but the people - and it had disappointed her somewhat to realise that she would now have to continue wearing what was supplied by the TARDIS wardrobe, which didn't always choose the most practical or well-matched garments.

But jewellery, that was a different matter.

She was currently stood by the counter inside a quiet jewellers; the decor in gold and red velvet seemed to soak up any noise and refuse

to let go. Glass cases lined the walls, glittering under spotlights.

A dignified, elderly lady returned to the counter, carrying a small display box. 'There we are, dear,' she said, This was the one, wasn't it?'

Peri gently took the ring that was inside. 'Oh yes,' she whispered, 'This was the one.'

The ring was silver, and held a single, deep-blue stone. The light captured inside the stone twirled and spun, like a universe in miniature. As she held it, she could almost feel it glow in her hand.

'Where did you get it?' she asked.

'Oh, it was sold to us as part of a job-lot, by a Miritmian,' the lady replied, 'He didn't know it was there. It's very old indeed. We haven't been able to tell what the metal, or the stone, is.'

Peri felt she couldn't take her eyes away. 'How much?'

The lady smiled. 'I'm not sure you'd be able to afford it.'

Peri offered her thumb. 'Check.'

Shrugging, the lady passed the print scanner over Peri's thumb, then checked the read-out.

Her eyebrows shot off the top of her head, but other than that she remained calm.

'Do I have enough?' Peri asked.

The elderly lady snorted. 'I'll say.'

Peri smiled. 'Then I'll take it.'

A hand clamped down across Peri's wrist. Another hand put the ring hack in its display box. Her eyes travelled up the arms to find Dill at the end of them.

'I'm afraid you won't be taking anything, my dear Miss Brown,' Shiffer's voice informed her from the entrance.

'Mr. Shiffer.' The old lady bowed slightly. 'To what do I owe this pleasure?'

Shiffer glided from the doorway to the counter. 'I do apologise for taking away your custom, Mrs. Favers,' he oozed, 'But I'm afraid that young Perpugilliam here is under suspicion of thieving.'

Mrs. Favers shook her head and tutted, appalled.

'What!' Peri was also appalled, though for different reasons. 'The watch that is in your left pocket,' Dill explained, 'We have reason to

believe that you stole it.'

'Oh, you do huh?' Peri tensed herself, in case a quick escape was necessary. 'That watch belongs to me, I paid for its repair.'

Shiffer stopped gazing lovingly at Peri and turned back to Mrs. Favers. 'Could I possibly see her financial details?'

'Anything for you, Mr. Shiffer,' the lady replied coyly and handed him the print-scanner.

Shiffer glanced at the read-out, and then read it again. 'Now that is interesting,' he murmured.

'What is?' Peri demanded, hoping that the Doctor hadn't made some mistake in programming their fake prints.

'Take a look at this Dill.' Shiffer handed the scanner to Dill, who read the display and whistled.

'What's the problem?' Peri asked, getting slightly more anxious now.

'My dear Perpugilliam,' Shiffer leaned close to her ear. 'Either you have some very impressive bankers, or you're a terrible liar. And I don't think that a member of the High Council of Time Lords would do their shopping here, do you? I must admit,' he continued, 'this was more or less a ruse but now I'm afraid you really do have no choice. You will come back to my boudoir for... interrogation.' The last word left Shiffer hoarse and he stalked away from Peri, trying not to hyperventilate.

Peri moaned quietly to herself. It appeared that shopping was not on today's agenda.

'The first thing would be to check the fault locator,' the Doctor explained to his audience of attentive thieves.

They had allowed him access to their ship and he was now bent over the exhaust nozzles, pretending to examine them. He would occasionally make the odd comment, such as 'hmm' or 'ahh', to make it look like he was actually doing something. As far as the Doctor could tell, the SpaceMaster was in perfect condition. But he didn't want *them* to know that.

'We could do that,' the bearded lady told him.

The Doctor spared her a brief glance. 'Yes, but what if the fault locator's at fault, hmm?' He straightened up. 'Catastrophe, that's what. I'll have to go inside and look.'

The Doctor walked to the other side of the arrow-design ship and made for the airtight hatch. A large arm blocked his way.

'No way are you going inside,' Gromm told him.

The Doctor sighed. 'Do have a little faith. I have to go inside if I'm to check the controls. Which are inside,' he added, with emphasis.

Gromm lowered his arm. 'All right, but I'm watching you.'

'Good,' the Doctor retorted, punching the 'open' panel. 'I do work so much better with an audience.' And he stepped inside.

Benny the Egg pulled at Gromm's sleeve.

'Cheeky,' he said.

'I know, Benny, I know,' Gromm replied, patting him on the head. 'We'll let this clown deal with the ship, and then you can kill him.'

The Doctor walked along the cramped hold, followed by the bearded lady and the other two men. Upon reaching the similarly cramped cockpit, he stopped, turned and cleared his throat.

'Now,' he announced, 'I would advise you to take notes as I will be asking questions afterwards.'

The heavies nodded and frowned in concentration.

The Doctor pointed to a display and pressed a few buttons. 'This is the fault locator. Its function, surprisingly, is to locate faults. It is activated via this control here.' He allowed everyone to see the display scrolling data across its screen. 'It registers no faults, so it is safe to continue with the next stage.'

He turned to the other side of the cockpit and a different bank of switches. The others turned to follow him.

The Doctor indicated a non-descript switch. 'When in the 'on' position, this control allows the engines to fire in simulation mode, allowing a practice run before launch. For our purposes, we want it switched 'on'.' The Doctor flicked the switch half-a-dozen times to demonstrate, being sure to leave it 'off'. 'Next, we prep the engines and run the launch program.'

His fingers fluttered over the controls faster than any of his guards could follow.

'And there we are,' he said, satisfied, 'The computer confirms and so we execute the program and watch the countdown.' Another jab at

a control and a countdown appeared on the main screen, counting down from sixty.

'Of course,' the Doctor added slowly, 'If you were doing this for real, you would open the exhaust flaps, otherwise the whole ship would explode.' He smiled sincerely and clapped his hands together. 'Right, that seems to be everything. Shall we go?'

The Doctor left the cockpit. The two men and the bearded lady stayed for a moment, watching as the controls flashed and beeped. The bearded lady turned to the two men.

'Did either of you follow that?'

The two men shook their heads.

'Nah,' the bearded lady replied, 'me neither.'

They left the ship. The countdown continued.

'Well, nothing seems to be wrong in there.' The Doctor's voice bounced around the loading bay.

Twenty... nineteen...

'Fantastic,' Gromm enthused without actually sounding enthused. 'Kill him Benny.'

Benny the Egg ran towards the Doctor in delight, brandishing his knife.

'Joy!' he cried happily.

Twelve... eleven...

'Wait a minute! Wait a minute!' the Doctor shouted angrily. Benny froze. 'I thought we had a deal?'

Seven... six...

Gromm stroked his chin, thinking.

'No,' he said finally. Benny continued to run.

'Two...' the Doctor counted loudly, 'one... zero!'

Benny slowed to a halt. Gromm looked around expectantly, as did the others behind the Doctor.

'Yes?' Gromm demanded.

The Doctor coughed and smiled apologetically. 'Sorry, must have lost count.'

And at that moment the engines of the SpaceMaster boomed into life, straining to force the power of its thrust through the closed exhaust

flaps.

'I must get a new watch,' the Doctor muttered ruefully. And then the ship exploded.

Shiffer and Dill were escorting a fuming Peri along the promenades of the complex to the security suite. She had refused to speak to either of them for the entire journey and her face was fixed into a scowl. This was upsetting Shiffer rather.

'Please do not make that face, dear Perpugilliam,' he pleaded as they walked, 'it spoils your natural beauty.'

No reply.

'It's just that you cannot imagine what a pleasure it is to see a *real* woman here, we never get any, do we Dill?'

The attaché smiled. 'No, we never get any.'

'No one of your elegance, certainly,' Shiffer continued, 'I mean just to look at you... your soft, flowing hair; your passionate lips; your fine neck; your incredible -'

'What about my eyes?'

'I'm not going that way, I'm sorry,' Shiffer apologised, glad that Peri had finally decided to talk. 'Where was I?'

Dill leant across. 'Her incredible -'

A fluted beeping coming from the breast pocket of his shirt interrupted him. Reaching inside, he produced a tiny gold brick which he held to his ear.

'What?' he demanded then, as he listened, Dill's jaw dropped in amazement.

Shiffer stamped a foot in impatience. 'What is it?'

Dill put the brick away. 'There's been an explosion in bay three-two-seven.'

Shiffer was incredulous. 'An explosion?'

Dill nodded. 'Automatics are dealing with the fire.'

Shiffer bristled. It would have to happen now! 'Well come along then, Dill. We have a duty to perform,' he ordered reluctantly.

'What about Miss Brown?'

Shiffer looked down at Dill as if he was stupid. 'Well what do you think? I'm not going to let her go now, just because there's been an

explosion - I'm looking forward to an explosion of my own. Bring her along.'

Shiffer walked quickly away, following the quickest route to bay three-two-seven. Dill indicated with a hand. 'Miss?'

Making fed-up grumbling noises, Peri followed Shiffer with Dill very close behind.

The Doctor fought his way through the rising sea of foam that was flowing from vents high up in the ceiling. The fire from the exploding ship had died almost instantly, but the foam hadn't noticed and was continuing to spurt forth, covering everything in a layer of white frothiness.

He could hear Gromm and the others shouting at each other. desperate to keep both their balance and sense of direction. The Doctor had been planning on running when the ship exploded however he was hard pushed to make out anything, let alone a door, through the fountains of foam.

He moved slowly forward, one arm stretched out in front, the other shielding his eyes and wiping the froth from his face.

Listening to the voices of the luckless thieves, he could tell he was moving away from them and that gave him hope. And then his hand hit something decidedly solid and the Doctor breathed a sigh of relief.

He promptly chocked on that sigh when an arm grabbed his hand; it transpired that the decidedly solid something was, in fact Gromm's chest. The ex-soldier looked rather unhappy.

'Blowing up my spaceship,' he growled, foam hanging from his features, is not being cheeky. It's being stupid. And impolite.'

The Doctor flinched as a quiet giggling drifted into his ear.

'Ah,' he said, 'Benny old chap, glad to see you're still with us.'

'Magpie for sale, ten pence a pound,' Benny replied in a conspiratorial whisper.

The Doctor pursed his lips and frowned. 'I take that back.'

Gromm grabbed the Doctor by the lapels of his coat. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you where you stand.' he demanded.

The Doctor eyed the amount of soapy fluid on the thug's hands. 'Could I have a minute to think about that one?'

Gromm shook him violently, then looked over the Time Lord's shoulder. 'I'll hold him still, Benny, and you get him.'

The Doctor listened carefully. He heard the knife being unsheathed. He sensed Benny pulling his arm back --

And twisted out of Gromm's grip. He slipped away easily, falling to one side.

Benny rushed forward, his knife narrowly missing Gromm, and crashed against his boss's massive body.

There was a flimsy crunch. The pair collapsed in a heap.

The Doctor became aware of a large hatch opening a little distance away. Three figures stood in the doorway.

'Nobody move! You are all under arrest!' a voice shouted.

'Well you certainly took your time!' the Doctor scoffed.

An amazed American voice floated across. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor squinted through the decreasing foam. 'Peri?'

The three figures walked gingerly forward. The Doctor noticed that a short, plain fellow was hovering close by Peri, a rather oddly dressed individual taking the lead.

'Is Miss Brown an acquaintance of yours?' the lead man asked politely.

'Yes,' the Doctor replied, uncertainly, 'Who are you?'

'Allow me to introduce myself,' the man said, bowing slightly, 'My name is Shiffer, Head of Security in this establishment. I'm afraid your friend is under arrest.'

'What for?' The Doctor stepped forward quickly.

'Falsifying her financial details,' the plain man answered, She billed all her purchases to the Time Lords, of all people.' He laughed.

'My assistant, Dill,' Shiffer explained, pointing at the other. 'As he suggests, such a notion is ridiculous.'

The Doctor searched his pockets. 'Really?' he replied sourly. Finding what he was after, he handed it to Shiffer.

It was a circular piece of bronze metal, featuring an elaborate logo engraving.

'The Seal of the High Council of Gallifrey,' the Doctor told Shiffer, his voice booming imperiously, contrasting with his snowman-like appearance. Peri tried not to laugh. 'I think you'll find that everything's

in order.' The Doctor pointed at Gromm's gang - the two thickset men and the bearded lady - who were emerging from the foamy landscape, chocking and spluttering. 'While you were arresting innocent people I apprehended these felons, on suspicion of shoplifting. Now take them away before I make a complaint.'

Shiffer visibly quaked before handing the seal back. 'Yes sir. Of course sir.'

A small wail came from the floor. The group turned.

Benny the Egg was kneeling on the floor and staring at Gromm in fury. In his hands he cradled the remains of a small egg, which dribbled through his fingers.

'Look what you've done!' he spat, 'Look what you've gone and done!' His voice died into a series of heavy sobs.

The Doctor moved across to Peri with a jubilant smile, threw an arm round her shoulders and nodded at the wailing psycho. 'I think the yolk's on him.'

Peri looked up at her friend in disgust. 'You know,' she said, 'Sometimes I think you deliberately manipulate events in order to make bad jokes.'

The Doctor looked more-or-less innocently back at her. 'What a silly idea.' His eyes hardened slightly. 'Have these two gentlemen been treating you well?'

Peri glanced at Shiffer and Dill, hoping her eyes conveyed evil intent.

'I sincerely hope that Miss Perpugilliam has no complaints,' Shiffer declared quickly.

'And that we can forget this whole unfortunate business ever happened,' Dill added with similar speed.

Peri looked up at the Doctor.

'Yeah,' she told him, 'Everything's fine.'

'Yes,' continued Dill, 'We'll just deal with these transgressors and take our leave.'

'You can try,' a gravelly voice told them. Gromm had stood and was spoiling for a fight, his giant fists raised. 'But you aren't taking me anywhere.'

Shiffer tutted. 'Oh yes we are,' he corrected. With a shout, he struck a pose, his fist connecting with Gromm's chin. The brute fell like

a brick.

'I warn the rest of you not to try anything,' Shiffer announced to the other wrongdoers, staying where he was. 'I'm an expert in martial vogueing.'

The rest of Gromm's gang were impressed and tried nothing.

The Doctor thrust his hands into his pockets. 'Since you seem to have everything under control, we'll be off.' With a beckoning wave to Peri, the Doctor left the loading bay, trailing foam behind him. Peri followed, her eyes daring Shiffer and Dill to say something. They stayed quiet and Peri left satisfied.

Dill sighed. 'Well, that's a set-back, isn't it?'

Shiffer was staring at the space Peri had just left. He clenched his fists. 'But we go on,' he muttered, 'We will prepare new seduction techniques, we will grow stronger. When the time is right we will emerge and claim our rightful place as the most sexually-potent men in this complex!' He shook with frustrated rage.

Dill indicated Gromm, the crushed Benny the Egg and his gang. 'Let's deal with these first, yes?'

Shiffer wilted. 'Oh you deal with them Dill,' he told his deputy, massaging his brow. 'I think I need to lie down.'

'So, what did you buy?' Peri asked as they reached the TARDIS. The Doctor was carrying a large cardboard box that featured no clue as to its contents.

The Doctor smiled indulgently. 'Just something to keep myself amused. When I tire of your presence,' he added, his eyes glinting mischievously.

'Thank you so very much.' Peri nudged her friend in the ribs.

'Did you get anything?' the Doctor asked, putting down his package and producing the TARDIS key.

'I wasn't allowed to buy the jewellery,' Peri complained, 'and the clothes were all too small. But,' she added, smiling and taking something from her pocket, 'I did get this.'

The Doctor was wrestling with the lock and didn't look. 'What?'

Peri offered it to him. 'It's for you,' she told him.

The Doctor looked and saw his fob watch lying in her palm. He

smiled and his face lit up, something that pleased Peri no end, as it was rare that it did.

'I'm sorry about your watch,' she added quietly.

The Doctor gently took the watch from her and opened it. A small electronic display twirled around inside.

'It's got a spectro-analyser!' the Doctor cried happily, 'And a twelve-digit co-ordinate event memory!' He pressed a button. 'And a light!'

He looked his friend in the eye.

'Thank you, Peri,' he said.

Peri shrugged modestly. 'Earned my keep for this year, huh?'

The Doctor pushed the TARDIS door open and appeared to think. 'Well...'

Peri hit him.

'Careful,' the Doctor warned playfully, 'I won't let you help me put this together.'

He disappeared inside the ship, taking his package with him.

Peri shook her head ruefully. She followed her friend inside. The door closed and the TARDIS burped and grunted out of existence.

As it did so, Peri's disbelieving voice could be heard drifting on the ether.

'You bought a *train set?*'

TIM KEABLE

Blind

Witold Tietze

She gazed at her surroundings with mixed feelings. On the one hand, this still wasn't home. But this place instilled in her a renewal of confidence, of hope.

'Where, then, are we?' she asked the man who, for the time being at least, was in full control of her destiny.

'I don't really know, I'm afraid,' he replied, evidently unsure of himself. He made circular rubbing gestures with his cupped hands, as if he was washing them with soap. 'I know I shouldn't lay all the blame on the TARDIS, but...'

'But it *is* the real problem, isn't it?' Ben assumed, stepping out of the misplaced blue police box at the top of the rise. 'Isn't it?' he repeated in his thick, cockney accent.

'Oh, now, Ben,' the Doctor said, approaching the sailor hastily (Ben noticed a slight hop in the clown-like man's stride), rubbing his hands nervously together once again. 'I don't think that's an entirely fair judgement.'

'That still doesn't change the fact,' Polly interjected, 'that you haven't answered my question. Where are we?'

'He told you, Duchess. The old geezer hasn't a clue.'

'Geezer, indeed!' the Doctor shouted, his stovepipe hat almost falling off his head. 'Why, the very thought! Ha! I may have been an old geezer when you first met me, but I've... I've rejuvenated,' he continued, excitedly. 'Why, I'm *much* younger than I used to be.'

'How can you be?' Polly inquired, as ever wanting to understand the Doctor's mode of thinking. 'I mean, it's not as though time runs backwards, is it?' She paused, thought for a second. 'Is it?' she asked again, more puzzled than before.

'I wouldn't be so hasty, Pol,' Ben told her. 'I mean, think about where we've been. The eighteenth century, 1986, even the twenty-first century. And that last one was on a different planet! Who's to say he

can't reverse time?'

'Thank you, Ben, for your confidence,' the Doctor said, more warmly than before. 'Now, perhaps we can put all this behind us. This place we've found is very beautiful, and I'm sure we could all use the rest.'

'Especially,' Ben added, 'after that trouble with the Daleks.'

'That reminds me,' Polly began. 'How *did* the Daleks recognise you so soon after you'd rejuvenated. I mean, they never had a chance to see your new form before that first Dalek knew who you were.'

'The Daleks are programmed to be very efficient,' the Doctor replied grimly. 'They could never lose sight of who their greatest enemy is. Besides which, most machines seem to be very temperamental.'

'Like the TARDIS?' Ben tried.

'That's not what I meant, and you know it,' the Doctor retorted, sounding a little more hostile than he'd liked. 'In fact, if you must know, I was referring to WOTAN.'

Polly wrinkled her face up, almost shivered. 'That horrid thing.'

'That's right. It kept telling everybody to call me “Doctor Who”. Where it came up with that name, I only wish I knew.'

'You said before that you were the Daleks' greatest enemy,' Ben said, again changing the subject.

'Yes,' the Doctor said simply, confidently.

'You?' Rather more than a hint of scepticism was apparent in Ben's tone.

'That wasn't the first time I'd foiled their plans, you know, Ben. Although, you're right. Past encounters would in no way give them an insight into my mind.'

'Then how?' Polly asked pensively.

'The only possibility, I'm afraid, is that I will confront them again.'

Polly knew she should have been worried by this news, but instead she felt only that she wanted to interpret the Doctor's cryptic prediction. 'How do you mean?'

'In my future, but in their past, we will meet again. And, for them to have remembered me from that occasion, some of them will survive our next encounter...' The Doctor suddenly trailed off, a worried look emerging on his face.

'But that won't happen for a long time,' Polly asked, hoping to get everyone's minds off the thought, 'will it?'

'Probably not,' the Doctor told her, unexpectedly cheery. 'Have you found anything of interest, Polly?'

She gazed out towards the open landscape again, seeing little more than grass and trees. 'I'm afraid not.'

'Oi, Doctor,' Ben said. 'We're not in Cornwall, are we? It sure looks like it.'

'I wouldn't imagine so, Ben. Just smell the air.'

Ben drew in a deep breath of the clear air, held it for several seconds, and exhaled. A smile crept onto his face. So pleased was he with the electrifying freshness of the air that he filled his lungs a second time.

'I can only assume,' the Doctor said, also allowing the air to flood through his olfactory system, 'that the sensation is the result of a high bombardment of positive ions. That's why it feels like England after a storm.'

'The electricity in the air is invigorating,' Polly said, dreamily.

Suddenly, the Doctor snapped back into action, bringing with him his two companions. 'Perhaps that will give us the answer!'

'The answer to what?' Ben asked agitatedly.

The Doctor pulled on his yellow braces, allowing yet more air to flood into his respiratory bypass system. 'To where we are!' he shouted gleefully.

Some time later — neither Polly nor Ben were sure precisely how long — the Doctor re-emerged from the TARDIS, his bright red recorder in tow.

'Well?' Ben asked. 'Where are we, then?'

'I've checked the instruments against our observations and, judging by where we've just come from, we appear to have arrived, well, here.'

Ben turned to Polly. 'The man's a genius,' he remarked sarcastically.

'Ben!' After a second or two in which to calm herself, Polly offered her words to the Doctor. 'Could you be more specific?'

'Of course. And I'm sorry. I must still be getting used to this new body. It's strange, I know, but it toys with the mind as well.'

'So, where are we?' Ben asked again.

'According to the instruments inside the ship, this place is known as the Eye of Orion.'

Ben mulled over the words. He'd never been in an eye of any description before this. 'The Eye of Orion, eh?'

'As far as I can gather, yes.'

'Well, then, where does that put us? In relation to Earth, I mean.'

'I'm not quite sure,' the Doctor replied, nervously fiddling with his recorder. He began to blow a tune, but it came out sour from the get go. 'You see, I've never been here before.'

'Well, that's just dandy, isn't it?' Ben scolded. He turned to face Polly, but his words were directed at the Doctor. 'We're probably millions of light years from the Earth, and he's got lost.'

'Now, I never said that,' the Doctor huffed. 'We're not lost.' He tried to find the words. 'We're just a little misplaced.'

'*Misplaced*!' Ben shouted. 'What do you think lost is?'

Polly winced. 'Ooh, I wish you wouldn't shout.'

'I'm sorry, Pol.'

'I'm sure the Doctor means well...'

But she was cut off. 'Means well? How can he possibly mean well? Ever since we left London, he's caused us nothing but trouble. I mean, who's to say he's even the Doctor?'

'Of course I'm the Doctor! And besides, that has nothing to do with it.' The Doctor put on what Ben took as a false grin — the kind you see on someone trying to get close enough to kill. 'Now, I've told you where we are. We can always leave if you like, but I thought a little time off might do us some good. Not even I can keep up the pace endlessly, you know.'

'No, of course you can't.' Again, Polly's calm, soothing voice quelled the storm. 'But it *would* be nice to know where we are and where we're going.'

'Now you're just taking the fun out of it,' said the Doctor, mischievously.

'What do you mean by that?' Ben queried, succeeding at keeping up a serious front without really trying.

'Oh, nothing,' the Doctor said slowly, almost winking at Polly. Instantly, she caught on.

And ran with the ruse. 'I suppose you're right, Doctor. It is rather fun living our lives this unpredictably. I'm quite enjoying it.'

'What?' But Ben could see that he had been duped. 'Well, if you two are going to play it that way.' He spun about on one foot, and began to march up the rise towards and past the TARDIS.

'Oh, no,' Polly frowned.

'Never mind him,' the Doctor suggested. 'Not everyone who can travel the seven seas has the stomach for Outer Space and Inner Time as well. He just needs some time off to readjust. Why don't we offer him that time, hmm?'

A slight smile began to creep onto Polly's youthful face. 'Alright.'

'In the meantime...' But the Doctor was cut off by a noise from deep within the TARDIS. It was the deep, repeated gong of a bell.

'What's that?' Polly asked.

'The Cloister Bell.'

'The what?'

'Trouble.'

The Doctor ran into the TARDIS console room, clutching his hat and recorder in the one hand. Polly, mere steps behind him, offered to empty the Doctor's hands, but he visibly declined.

Reaching out his full hand towards a control on the six-sided console, the Doctor at last noticed its contents. 'Polly, dear,' he began, looking intently at the control which he was set on activating, 'would you please put my hat up on the hat stand.'

'Of course,' she replied without a second's hesitation, grinning slightly to herself.

'And the recorder can go into the chest.'

She speedily complied with the Doctor's request, resting the hat carefully on the stand (she wondered, what kind of things had this hat stand seen in its time?), and laid the recorder gently upon Saladin's sword within the Doctor's antique chest.

Meanwhile, the Doctor had been frantically working every conceivable control, but to no avail. The Cloister Bell continued to toll.

'Is there anything I can do?' Polly asked of the Doctor.

He shook his head. 'I don't think so, no.'

Polly could see that the Doctor was intent on solving the problem, and stood back, allowing him to continue uninterrupted.

'Polly!' the Doctor shouted at the time rotor that lay at the heart of the console.

'Yes,' she replied, slightly unsure of the Doctor's faculties at this point in time.

'They say the eye of a storm is its calmest point. Unfortunately, this does not apply to spatial clusters.'

Polly's bones were beginning to turn cold. 'What... What do you mean, Doctor?'

'I mean,' he said, turning and focusing fully on his companion, 'it's time we went to look for Ben.'

He wasn't entirely certain just what had turned him around but, whatever it was, he was glad that it had done the trick.

It had taken six months of hard work and strict discipline for Ben to attain his sea legs. Now, he was sure, he had his space legs as well.

'When you walk through a storm...' he told himself, but was cut off in mid-sentence by the cries of the Doctor and Polly.

'Ben!' Polly shouted. 'Ben!'

Ben turned his attention from the vast wilderness that was the Eye of Orion, and looked down the hillside at his two approaching companions. Although at a distance, they both seemed to be running with all their might up the hill. It didn't click instantly, but Ben soon realised that something was amiss.

'What's the problem?' he shouted back down to them, cupping his hands around his mouth to increase the volume of his words.

'The Cloister Bell!' the Doctor called. 'We have to...'

The ground shook, knocking the Doctor over. Ben, too, fell to the ground, while Polly was able to perch herself against a tree.

As the tremor began to subside, Ben lifted himself to his feet and walked slowly down to where the Doctor was lying. He offered his hand. 'Here. Get up.'

The Doctor welcomed his companion's help. As he stood, the

Doctor began to dust himself off. 'Or did you do it because I'm an old geezer, and I could never lift myself up without help?'

'Don't I get any help?' Polly asked Ben sternly, interrupting the exchange.

The Doctor threw a brief, cursory glance to Ben, who caught its meaning instantly.

'I'm sorry, Duchess,' Ben told Polly, suddenly recalling her question, 'but I've only got two 'ands.'

Another tremor was enough to draw the trio's focus back to the problem at hand. 'What's going on?' Ben asked the Doctor.

'This planet is on its last legs,' the Doctor explained. 'It has lived a long, full life, but the time has come to give this sector of space to something new.'

'Then the plan is?'

The ground trembled again, this time more violently than before. The hill churned, emitting the sounds of a planet about to consume itself. Once majestic trees found themselves eaten up by the soil beneath them; grass turned stale and brown in seconds the sky washed black with cloud cover.

The Doctor, taking his companions' hands, shouted, 'Run like rabbits!'

And they ran, dodging obstacles as they came ever closer to the one haven on this dying planet — the TARDIS.

The first thing the Doctor did as he entered the safety of the TARDIS was to seal both the inner and outer doors.

'There,' he told his companions, clapping the dust from his hands. 'We should be safe now.'

'Shouldn't we take off?' Polly asked, her voice quivering.

'Yes, I suppose we should.'

'How can you be so calm about this?' Ben asked, near furious.

'The TARDIS is a spaceship. Like any other, it is capable of existing in outer space, which is all that will remain once this planet is destroyed. And unlike any other spaceship, it cannot be damaged or destroyed from the outside.'

'Well, could you *please* dematerialise anyway?' Polly pleaded. 'If

nothing else, it would make us feel a lot happier.'

'Of course,' the Doctor said, smiling. And with that, he set the controls to dematerialise the ship.

As the light at the top of the fading blue box flashed, the planet which lay within the very Eye of Orion roared out its final majestic battle cry, and charged towards its inevitable demise.

'It's a shame that planet broke apart like that,' Ben said, voicing his concern. 'I was just beginning to like it.'

'You must be some sort of a jinx,' Polly offered, trying her hardest to suppress a smile. But it was no good. She soon broke out into laughter, as did Ben.

'Where to next, Doctor?' Ben asked. 'Or is asking that question a complete waste of time?'

The Doctor smiled a toothy grin. 'How about the Eye of Orion.'

'You *are* mad!'

'Not necessarily, Ben. After all, this is a *time* machine.'

Ben's eyes darted wide open in hope and anticipation. 'Then we could go back to before it was destroyed?'

'I don't see why not.'

'I do,' Polly interjected.

'Oh?'

'Well, you can't exactly steer the TARDIS, can you?'

'Nevertheless, I've been to Earth many times, and in many points in its history. I don't see it as entirely unlikely that we might return here one day.'

'As long as it's not today,' said Ben. 'Oh, and another thing, Doctor. If you can't play the recorder, then don't.'

'I took lessons from Paul McCartney, if you please,' the Doctor said proudly.

Both Ben and Polly laughed. And laughed. And laughed.

But the Doctor couldn't understand why.

PETER "PSHAW" SHAW

Coda

JOSHUA LOU FRIEDMAN

Tulloch, Scotland - September, 1976

A typical morning on the moor. Tall trees, lush greens blanketed by a low-lying fog, the sound of chirping birds accompanied by the aroma of wet grass. All was as it was every morning save the unusual presence of a tall, blue police box... and the five figures standing in front of it.

'Coming?' asked the Doctor.

The Brigadier took a step back. 'No, thank you.'

The Doctor fired a look over to Harry.

'I think I'll stick to inter-city this time, Doctor.' Harry said flatly.

The Time Lord frowned, then turned to Sarah. 'Sarah?'

She'd been through this before. 'Uhhmm...'

The Doctor's eyes sank. 'No?'

Noting his expression, Sarah changed her tune. 'Alright, providing we *do* go straight back to London.'

'Oh yes, we will... I promise.'

The two exchanged a smile as Sarah stepped forward and entered the TARDIS.

Nodding farewell to Harry, the Brigadier, and the Duke of Forgill, the Doctor disappeared into the police box behind her.

A few moments passed, before the familiar whir of the TARDIS engines whisked the capsule off into nothingness.

The Duke of Forgill gasped. 'Well I'll be...' He turned to the Brigadier. 'Do they have return tickets?'

'Yes, I imagine so.' The Brigadier replied jokingly.

'You should have taken them and got your refund, man... I thought you were a Scotsman?'

Harry chuckled at the exchange, his mind drifting back to the first time he had stepped into the TARDIS, a mere four weeks prior. He motioned back toward the main road. 'Shall we?'

The Brigadier and Duke of Forgill nodded, and the three of them

began making their way back.

As they neared the Brigadier's jeep, a wave of nausea hit Harry harder than a falling chunk of masonry. 'Whoa... hang on a minute.'

The Brigadier turned and immediately noticed Harry's face had grown pale white. 'Are you alright, man?!'

'I'm not... sure... I...' The nausea gave way to an intense dizziness, causing his knees to buckle. Harry pitched forward, the Brigadier catching him just in time.

'I've got you... try not to move.'

'I think I need to lie down...' Harry managed, gasping for air.

The Brigadier lowered Harry upon the grass before turning to the Duke.

'Stay with him... I'll ring for an ambulance.'

The Duke tended to Harry as the Brigadier bolted toward the jeep.

As Lethbridge-Stewart rang for help, Harry looked up at the Duke.

'I guess... this just isn't... my day.' And with that, Harry passed out.

Not unlike their first meeting, Liz Shaw found herself once again sitting across the desk from Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart within a wave of *déjà vu*.

'We need your help, Miss Shaw.'

'To the point as usual, Brigadier. What is it this time? The Doctor no longer making house calls?'

'Actually, it's because of your very dealings with the Doctor that I've asked you here.' The Brigadier slid a folder towards her. Upon opening it, Liz was confronted with the photo and dossier of Naval Surgeon Lieutenant Harry Sullivan.

'Lieutenant Sullivan here recently had the fortune to brave a few scrapes alongside the Doctor, much like yourself.'

'Very eye-opening experiences.'

'Well in Harry's case, I'm afraid his eyes got opened a little too wide.'

'Explain...'

'Two days ago, Lieutenant Sullivan parted ways with the Doctor... and almost immediately began acting up.'

'Acting up?'

'Some sort of breakdown... kept ranting on about some of the things he experienced out there: Daleks, Cybermen, Sontarans and so forth. Oh he's fine now, just left feeling a bit out of sorts.'

'Well it stands to reason. Most people are used to leading normal lives without the intervention of amphibious monsters or alien influences.'

'I agree. And while such encounters might go over fine with our lot, the prospects may be too much to handle for others.'

'Like Lieutenant Sullivan.'

'Precisely...'

Liz looked him over, then: 'What is it you want from *me* then?'

'I want you talk to him... help him come to terms with experiences.'

Liz laughed out loud. 'I'm not a psychologist, Brigadier.'

'No, but you have worked more directly with the Doctor... and *that* Miss Shaw qualifies you for the job.'

Liz thought about it for a moment before speaking. 'Alright. I suppose I'll do it.'

'Splendid.'

'Where is Lieutenant Sullivan now?'

'Convalescing in a private hospital just outside the city. I've a car waiting outside.'

'And when I'm finished?'

The Brigadier stood up. 'It's right back to Cambridge, I promise.'

'That's what you said the last time.' With that, she nodded *adieu* and made for the door.

After navigating her way through the corridors of the building, Liz finally emerged from UNIT HQ to be met by Sergeant Benton... waiting behind the wheel of yet another bit of nostalgia from Liz's past.

'Bessie!' Liz exclaimed.

Benton smiled. 'Fancy a lift, Miss Shaw?'

Liz got inside and shut the door behind her. 'Well, this certainly is shaping up to be quite a reunion.'

The yellow vintage automobile pulled up in front of the small military hospital shortly over an hour later. Sergeant Benton helped Liz out of the car before escorting her into the building. The duo made their way

through several hallways, finally reaching a security checkpoint before the debriefing room door. Benton exchanged a nod with the guard while passing by. Liz raised an eyebrow.

'The Brigadier isn't taking this lightly, I see.'

'UNIT takes care of its own.' Benton replied with a smile. Upon reaching their destination, the Sergeant took up position adjacent to the room door.

'He's all yours.'

'Quite...'

'Give us a shout when you're finished.'

Liz nodded, then disappeared inside.

Looking very feverish, Harry bolted upright from his slumped position on the couch as Field Major Styre entered the room. 'Lieutenant Harry Sullivan, I presume.' Liz said.

Shaking off the subconscious image of the Sontaran, Harry eyed her suspiciously. 'That's correct... and you?'

Stepping forward, she offered her hand and a smile. 'Professor Liz Shaw, I was summoned from Cambridge?'

'Psychologist?' asked Harry while shaking her hand.

'Scientist, actually... I hold degrees in both physics and chemistry.'

She took up a chair in front of him and produced a small tape recorder from her bag.

Harry looked puzzled. 'And the Brigadier sent *you* to diagnose my condition?'

'Well, yes. It appears you and I share something in common, Lieutenant.'

'And what might that be?'

'The Doctor.'

Harry smiled. 'Oh, I say. Well, any friend of the Doctor's...'

'We worked together as colleagues just under six years ago. Lethbridge-Stewart felt I was in a position to better understand your, shall we say, experiences.'

'Right.' Harry acknowledged.

Liz motioned towards the tape recorder. 'Shall we begin?'

Harry nodded, prompting her to hit the record button.

'How would you describe your symptoms, Lieutenant?'

'Harry, please.'

'Alright, Harry. Tell me about them.'

'Well I haven't been able to shake this fever I've been running, for one. Then there's the anxiety attacks, the visions. But apart from these episodes, I'm in complete control of my faculties so I can't be going mad... can I?'

Liz straightened up in her chair while referring to her case file. 'From what I understand, you've suffered several of these attacks over the last forty-eight hours.'

'That's correct.'

'And the visions?'

'Well, for example, I'll turn a corner and see a Dalek or a Zygon waiting to do me in, and then the next moment, nothing.'

'And how often do these visions appear?'

'Every six hours, or so... just now, actually.'

Liz thought for a moment, then: 'Perhaps it would help us best if we just took it from the beginning?'

Harry wiped the sweat from his forehead. 'The beginning?'

'Yes, I want you to recount the recent four weeks you spent with the Doctor. It would better help my diagnosis if we had a common frame of reference from which to build on.'

Harry nodded. 'Right, well it all started last month back at UNIT HQ. I was assigned the most peculiar patient...'

Four hours (and three audio cassettes) later, Harry had finished his tale: Think Tank and that business with the Kettlewell robot, Space Station Nerva with its Wirrn infestation, the skirmish with the Sontaran, the Kaled/Thal war on Skaro which bred the Dalek threat, thwarting the Cybermen's plan to destroy Voga, and finally defeating the Zygon menace near the waters of Loch Ness. Sullivan left no stone unturned... every detail accounted for leaving Liz with the feeling she'd been through it all herself. It was also noticeable that Harry's grip on his fever was slipping; he was perspiring more and growing paler by the minute.

'Perhaps we should stop here,' Liz proposed.

'Just a bit winded, I could probably manage a little while longer... don't worry, I'll rest afterwards.'

'Alright, just remember we can end this the moment you're not feeling up to it.'

'Right-o. Anyway, what do you make of my story?'

'Well it all sounds completely bananas, which is about a hundred percent accurate when the Doctor's involved.'

'Familiar, eh?'

'A little too familiar... though I still can't wrap my head around the curly hair and teeth.'

'That's what the Brigadier said shortly after his regeneration.'

Liz looked over her notes. 'Well, your condition seems obviously connected to your travels as of late. As I told Lethbridge-Stewart, the revelation that there actually is life beyond our planet can sometimes be too much for the mind to take. And it's been proven possible for such stress to have a physical affect on the body, hence your fever,' she smiled. 'In short, you're only human, Harry.'

'Well I wish I felt a bit more -' Harry stirred. Another wave of dizziness hit him, this time accompanied by an intense burning from inside. Harry suddenly began wincing in pain.

Alarmed, Liz leaned forward. attempting to comfort him. 'Harry, what's wrong?!'

'Not quite... sure... it's worse this time... I can feel it!!' Harry lurched forward from the couch hitting the floor face first.

Scrambling to get a hold of Harry, Liz cried out to toward the door. 'Sergeant!'

The door opened to reveal a very alarmed Sergeant Benton.

'Get a team in here... NOW!'

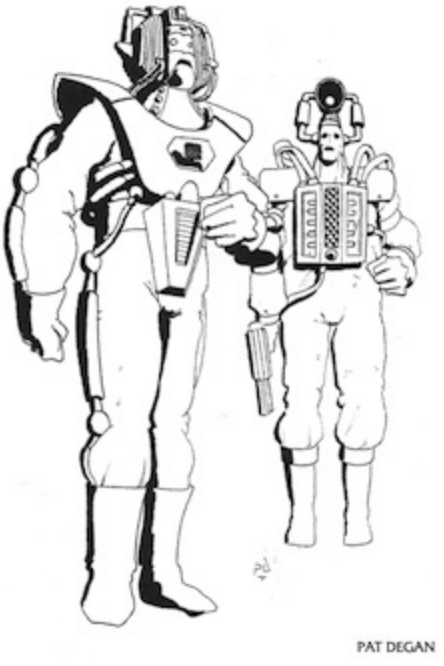
Springing into action, Benton vanished as quickly as he appeared.

Liz began calming Harry as she made an effort to roll him over. 'Hold tight, Lieutenant... they're on their way!'

Finally turning him on his back, Liz caught sight of Harry's face and immediately gasped. 'Oh my god...'

Now visible along the side of his left cheek, Harry's veins were beginning to glow iridescent through his skin.

That night, the Brigadier stood in the hospital's observation room, staring through the Plexiglas barrier into an adjoining lab. Inside, Harry lay stabilized, surrounded by a group of medics fervently trying to keep him so. Behind the Brigadier stood Liz Shaw, herself flanked by two scientists.



'Perhaps now that I've arrived, you'll explain why you had me deliver this *particular* bit of cargo, Miss Shaw? And before I hand it over, I'll need a little more detail than what you gave over the phone.'

'I'll let Harry tell you himself...' Liz hit play on her tape recorder and Harry's voice filled the air: '*Through Kellman, the Cybermen deployed these metallic snakes to infect the Nerva crew. One of those buggers attacked Sarah Jane... injecting her with some kind of poison. Well the Doctor figured she only had minutes, so he shot us down to the planet's surface via Trans-mat hoping that would screen out the venom. Well it worked didn't it? Mind you, we almost didn't make it... the Doctor didn't have the component he needed to send us off so I watched him hold the circuit in place himself, used his body as a sort of conductor I suppose*. '

Liz hit stop on her recorder. 'Apparently, the transport wasn't a complete success... though the poison was filtered from Sarah's molecules, a few of its basic elements became mixed into Harry's. His bloodwork confirms this.' Liz brought forward the older of the two scientists. 'I've called in two specialists... this is Dr. Compton Mackenzie, UNIT's resident haematologist.'

The Brigadier gave an acknowledging nod as Mackenzie got right to the point.

'The basic compounds of the venom were spread throughout his bloodstream... its taken a while for them to join, wrecking havoc with his system along the way. That explains why it waited so long to manifest itself.'

'It also explains Harry's condition, as of late.' Liz added.

The Brigadier gave her a look. 'And what can you do to cure him? Can you find an antidote?'

Liz motioned to the younger scientist. 'That's where Professor Chalfont here comes into play. He's on loan from Trinity... mathematics.'

'And computer sciences,' added Chalfont. 'Dr. Mackenzie and I believe that Lieutenant Sullivan's salvation lies in the cargo you've brought. May we have access to it?'

The Brigadier looked the trio over. 'I believe I know where you're going with this... permission granted.'

Thirty minutes later, several soldiers, led by Sergeant Benton, wheeled the Brigadier's 'cargo' into the lab; a coffin-shaped storage unit. Liz, Mackenzie and Chalfont all stood by as they removed the unit's contents and placed it on the vertical slab adjacent to Harry's bed.

Liz stepped forward. 'So, this is what they call... a Cyberman.'

The Brigadier spoke as he entered the lab. 'One of the bodies we confiscated after their attempt to invade London. And you think the antidote lies somewhere in its programming?'

'Chalfont believes he can access its memory banks... the Cybermen designed the venom, therefore the toxicology exists within its database. Once Chalfont locates and translates the code, Mackenzie will be able to identify the compounds and develop an antitoxin.'

'And if this particular unit wasn't programmed with the right toxicology?' Asked the Brigadier.

'It's our only shot to save Harry,' Liz offered.

Lethbridge-Stewart eyed the lifeless machine lying on the slab, not trusting it.

'Very well. Use only the amount of power needed to access its memory bank... nothing more.'

Chalfont spoke up. 'The requirements will be minimal.'

The Brigadier seemed satisfied. 'Carry on.'

He turned and exited the lab, leaving the trio of scientists to their work.

Harry Sullivan awoke the next morning feeling the best he'd felt in a

long time. Fully recovered, he looked around and realized he was in a small private room somewhere within the hospital. He began to get out of bed, when the door to his room opened revealing both Liz Shaw and the Brigadier.

'Good morning, Lieutenant Sullivan. You're looking better, old chap,' said the Brigadier.

'I'm certainly feeling better.'

'What was the last thing you remember?' Asked Liz.

'I was sitting in debriefing talking to you... I recall a burning... then dizziness, then... nothing.'

'Well it's been quite a long night, but we succeeded.'

'You discovered what was wrong with me? Did I suffer a breakdown?'

'It wasn't psychological at all, more like physiological... even managed a cure.'

'I suppose I have you to thank for that,' he said gratefully.

'Don't thank me, it was a Cyberman that saved your life.'

Harry looked at her twice. 'Come again?'

'If you're feeling up to it, you can meet him if you like.'

'I thought *I* was the only loony around here.'

The Brigadier smiled. 'Get dressed, we'll be waiting outside.'

They left the room, allowing a very puzzled Harry to rise from his hospital bed and begin changing.

Chalfont was unhooking the Cyberman from the lab computer as the Brigadier escorted Harry inside. Liz and Mackenzie flanked them.

'Didn't think you'd be seeing one of these so soon again, eh Sullivan?' The Brigadier said, indicating the lifeless, silver behemoth.

Harry eyed the Cyberman intently. 'I'll say.'

Almost immediately, it was as if his recent encounter with the Cybermen had never ended.

It was hard enough with the hallucinations over the last two days, but this was the real thing. Standing face to face with the metal monster, Harry shook off his uneasiness and turned to Liz. 'So you mentioned you were able to locate the antidote within its programming?'

'Once we charged its memory banks, it was a simple matter of linking it up to the lab computer and sorting through the code... Professor Chalfont here translated, whilst Dr. Mackenzie and I identified the organic compounds,' she replied.

'Jolly well brilliant that is... mind you, we could've bloody well used your lot on Nerva.'

Liz raised an eyebrow. 'Well, from what you've told me, their crew never had access to an actual Cyberman... especially not as ideal a specimen like our friend here.'

'Of all the 'souvenirs' left over from our encounter with them eight years ago, this unit was the least damaged,' interjected the Brigadier.

'It is *dead*, isn't it?' Harry asked, again gazing over the Cyberman.

Chalfont stepped forward. 'Quite dead. Besides, we only allowed the unit enough juice to activate its archives, not its core programming.'

'Then why stop now?' Harry turned to the Brigadier. 'If you don't mind allowing us further access to it, I don't see why we shouldn't study more of these archives. Who knows what else we night come across?'

Mackenzie chimed in. 'It would be foolish not to take advantage of this opportunity, Brigadier. Could be any number of breakthroughs buried about in there... medical or scientific.'

The Brigadier thought about it, then: 'Very well, I'll allow the four of you to carry on here for another few days. I'm off back to London, but I'll leave Sergeant Benton and his men behind to assist you. Keep me appraised of your progress.'

'Right. Thank you, Brigadier.'

'Welcome back, Sullivan... and good luck, to all of you.'

The Brigadier turned and exited, leaving them to begin their work.

Harry looked over to Liz. 'Well, I guess you'd better bring me up to speed then...'

'Certainly,' replied Liz.

She and Mackenzie began going over the procedure specifics with Harry as Chalfont began hooking the Cyberman back up to the lab computer.

Twenty-four hours later, Harry and Chalfont were at each other's

throats.

'And I'm telling you, the computer's identified a cache of protected memory... the only way to access the datablock is to feed the unit forty more amps!' Chalfont argued.

'It's too dangerous... we can't chance activating its primary systems!' Harry rebutted.

Liz indicated the Cyberman. 'The unit's already running at seventy... Harry's right, we can't run the risk!'

'Risk is the mother of progress, Miss Shaw. That datablock's sealed for a reason... it's what we're looking for.' Chalfont then turned to Mackenzie. 'And *your* position on this?'

Mackenzie's head slumped. 'We're dealing with an *alien* technology here... though I share your instincts, I've learned to trust UNIT's discretion.'

Chalfont stood his ground. 'At the first sign of trouble, we need only to pull the plug.'

Harry stared him down. 'We are not to take another step without first conferring with the Brigadier. Only upon his authorization and after relocation to a more controlled environment will I recommend we proceed any further.'

'Ah, the bureaucratic protocol... and how long will we have to wait before such approval?'

'Patience is a bitter vine that bears sweet fruit,' offered Liz.

Chalfont rattled on. 'Perhaps the United Nations will want to bring in their specialists... maybe take credit for all the significant findings, no doubt.'

'Let's just see what the Brigadier says, shall we?' Harry said. 'In the meantime, I suggest we take a break for now... give our nerves a chance to settle.'

This seemed to get through to Chalfont. 'Perhaps you're right. We should stop here and wait for the Brigadier's response.'

'Thank you, Professor,' Harry threw a final glance toward the motionless Cyberman. 'Power it down... we'll have Sergeant Benton get on the radio with UNIT HQ.'

Chalfont complied, and the quartet promptly exited the lab.

At a checkpoint established just outside the hospital entrance, Benton lowered the radio from his lips, then turned toward Harry, Liz, Chalfont and Mackenzie. 'Well that's it then... the Brigadier wants you to suspend the experiment until he can discuss the matter with the PM. Until then, we're to secure the perimeter while you break down the lab and organize your findings... the Brigadier wants a full report ready in the morning.'

Harry turned toward his colleagues. 'Right... it looks like we'll be burning the midnight oil for a second night in a row.'

Liz stirred at the prospect. 'Let's at least get a couple of hours sleep beforehand, I can barely keep my eyes open.'

Chalfont nodded. 'I concur; we're in no shape to keep going. We'll reconvene in the lab in say, three hours?'

All nodded in agreement before making their way back inside the hospital.

As the others were resting within their prospective quarters, Chalfont crept out of his room and began discreetly making his way through the hallways of the hospital's many wings toward the main lab. Once there, he made one last check to make sure he wasn't spotted or followed, before disappearing inside.

Upon entering the lab, Chalfont crossed the room and activated the lab computer... still wired to it, the Cyberman lay motionless on the slab behind him.

Obviously acting upon his own agenda, Chalfont turned toward the distributor feeding the Cyberman power... and cranked up the output by forty amps. A low hum emanated from the distributor as Chalfont turned back to his console and began impetuously trying to gain access to the protected datablock.

After a few moments of this, Chalfont sighed, realizing he was getting nowhere. He looked over the Cyberman, took a deep breath, and punched the distributor up an additional twenty amps.

The hum grew louder as Chalfont tried it again. Columns of digital code coming from the Cyberman's memory banks began to flash across his computer screen.

The Professor looked over at the unit still lying across the slab, than

back at his monitor.

The streams of code began to fluctuate... something was happening. He turned around again... alive and upright, the Cyberman was looming over him.

Chalfont screamed.

Harry couldn't sleep.

Emerging from his room, he made his way down the hallway towards the lab.

Upon entering it, Harry immediately noticed the Cyberman was missing... he also realized he wasn't alone in the room: Chalfont was sitting at the computer, his back to him.

'What the hell's going here?! What happened to the specimen?'

There was no reply.

Harry moved forward and grabbed the professor by the shoulder.

Chalfont's body slumped over in his chair... his neck clearly broken.

'Oh my word...'

Springing into action, Harry crossed the room and sounded the alarm just as the Cyberman emerged from the shadows, charging the Lieutenant.

Harry spun around in time to duck out of the way as the silver giant lunged at him.

The Cyberman was now blocking the door... Harry's only other option was the door to the observation room.

Activating its chest unit, the Cyberman emitted a bolt of pure energy from the barrel crowning his forehead.

The bolt was blocked by the observation room door just as Harry opened it. Upon throwing himself inside, he turned and slammed the door shut before quickly securing the locks.

The observation room window offered Harry a view of the Cyberman, and vice-versa.

From the Cyberman's point of view, its visual systems were fluctuating... clearly it needed more power in order to regain a full recovery.

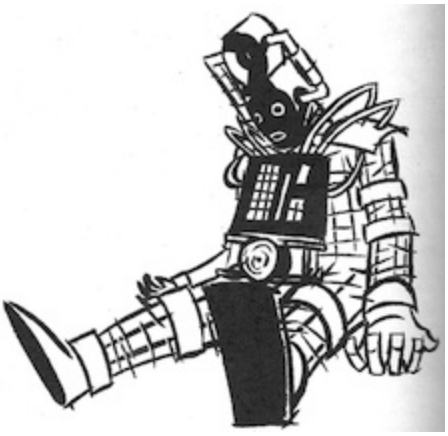
All it knew now was to destroy its captors... starting with the one hiding behind the clear Plexiglas barrier that separated the room from

the lab.

Harry moved to the room's other door, leading back out into the hospital... it was locked from the outside.

Trapped, Harry tensed up as the Cyberman approached the barrier and promptly began punching its way through. The creature's metallic fists made short work of the Plexiglas and it had soon made a hole big enough to climb through. As it did so, Harry took advantage of the opportunity by lunging forward and gripping the prongs that framed the Cyberman's head. Using them like handles, he violently yanked his attacker clear through the hole and downward.

The action caused both he and the Cyberman to hit the floor hard, landing side by side.



The Cyberman stirred. Harry rolled on top of it, using his body weight to spring past the creature and toward the hole in the barrier.

Harry climbed into the lab as the Cyberman rose to a stance in the observation room behind him. Responding to the alarm, Liz and Benton appeared in the lab doorway just as Harry was about to make his way through it.

'What's happened?!' Liz asked.

Harry motioned behind him. 'Apparently, our friend Chalfont managed to pull a Dr. Frankenstein before his untimely demise.'

The Cyberman began climbing its way back into the lab.

'Alright, fall back!' Benton yelled.

The Sergeant guided Harry and Liz down the hallway and out of harm's way as his troops arrived and took up positions along the length of the corridor.

Benton quickly turned and addressed them.

'Stand ready!'

All eyes and sights were trained upon the lab door as the Cyberman emerged from inside.

'Fire!'

The UNIT soldiers obliged, opening fire upon the metal monster as it

moved towards them.

The bullets seemed to have no affect on the Cyberman as it loomed forward.

Safely behind the platoon, Liz exchanged a glance with Harry.

'I'm the one who called Chalfont in... this is all my fault.'

'Don't be too hard on yourself, old girl. If you recall, it was my suggestion to experiment on the bugger in the first place.'

In front of them, the Cyberman returned fire by emitting several bolts of energy from its forehead. Benton's point man went down, screaming.

The remaining soldiers took cover within various doorways along the hallway. More bolts whizzed by, taking out portions of the wall and ceiling. The Cyberman seemed to be firing sporadically rather than choosing specific targets - something was obviously wrong with it.

Mackenzie rounded the corner near Harry and Liz, noticed the Cyberman, then took cover along with his colleagues.

He fired a look towards Harry. 'You never mentioned it could sleepwalk!'

'Chalfont's work, I'm afraid.'

Benton and his men took the offensive again, firing off a second barrage. The Cyberman answered with another spread, some of the bolts finding their targets as two more UNIT soldiers went down.

'FALL BACK!' Benton ordered.

Firing away, the remaining men began to do so, retreating to a position back around the corner near Harry, Liz and Mackenzie. Benton turned to Harry, grabbing him by the jacket. 'Get back!'

The Lieutenant wasn't listening, instead he was peeking around the corner, studying the Cyberman's movements.

'No, look!' Harry exclaimed pointing a fmger.

Benton leaned forward and saw that the Cyberman had ceased fire and was now turning back toward the lab, staggering along the way.

'It's weakening, I think it needs more power...'

At the other end of the hallway, the Cyberman disappeared into the lab.

Harry shot Benton a look. 'Come with me!'

The Sergeant followed Harry as he bolted down the corridor toward

the lab.

Upon reaching the door, Harry and Benton stopped and looked inside.

The Cyberman was rewiring itself to the distributor. attempting to drain more power from it.

Harry looked at Benton. 'Are you with me?'

The Sergeant nodded, gathering Harry's strategy without a word being exchanged between them. 'In for a penny, in for a pound,' he replied.

'Now!' Harry exclaimed and the duo ran into the room: Benton charging the Cyberman while Harry dived for the distributor.

The Sergeant jumped on top of its back, trying to wrestle the creature away from Harry who was recalibrating the machine.

Though low on juice, the Cyberman had no trouble overcoming Benton. Grabbing him off its back, the silver giant effortlessly flung the Sergeant away, sending him flying across the lab.

Benton's body hit hard against the lab computer before sliding to the floor.

The Cyberman turned toward Harry.

Harry felt the grip of metal fingers tighten around his neck as he cranked the amps up full, maximizing the machine's output.

Taking in a more powerful surge than it bargained for, the Cyberman pulled away from Harry, sparks erupting along its body everywhere. Now free, Harry dived out of the way as the overload caused the Cyberman's head to explode, sending debris flying everywhere.

Smoke emanating from the headless stump, the Cyberman's body collapsed to the floor, dead for good this time.

Both stirring from the battle, Harry and Benton exchanged a sigh of relief.

'Not bad, Lieutenant!' Benton said.

Harry was still trying to catch his breath. 'Thank you very much, Sergeant!'

Standing in front of the hospital hours later, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart eyed Harry, Liz and Mackenzie.

'Your little experiment cost us four good men today.'

Harry's head was slumped. 'I'm aware of that, Sir.'

'We had to try, Brigadier.' Liz interjected. 'Though we did not foresee the loss of life, we regret it no less.'

'Chalfont's discretion ended where his ambition began...' added Mackenzie, 'and he suffered the consequences. If you're going to blame anyone, blame him.'

'Perhaps...' said the Brigadier. 'In either case, I've got a report to file. If you'll all accompany me to UNIT HQ, we'll take depositions and get things all straightened out from there.'

All nodded in agreement.

The Brigadier and Mackenzie exited toward a nearby jeep.

Benton drove up in Bessie, stopping alongside Harry and Liz.

'Hop in,' he said with a smile.

They climbed into the back and took their seats as Benton drove off.

Harry looked over at Liz. 'I never thanked you for saving my life...'

'You would have done the same for me.'

'That jolly well may be, but it doesn't change the need to express my gratitude,' he said.

'You had something in mind?'

'Dinner perhaps?' he offered.

Liz smiled, obviously quite flattered by the request. 'I'd love to.'

Harry returned the smile as the two were driven off into the city.

The Star Racer

TREVOR BAXENDALE

The Doctor returned to the TARDIS in a sombre mood, operating the controls that would send his ship spinning into the space-time vortex with uncharacteristic disinterest.

The space-liner was safe. He had successfully identified the problem with its drive system and, after a tense but nevertheless enjoyable couple of hours in the engine room (coat off, shirtsleeves rolled up) wrestling with the very guts of the huge vessel, had everything back on-line and working satisfactorily.

He had been tempted, it had to be said, to make some modifications - this branch of supralight technology was still in its infancy at the time the TARDIS had answered the passenger liner's *m'aidez* and its engines, whilst powerful, were naive in design and prone to exactly this kind of malfunction.

A little bit of tinkering would have resulted in a much improved, faster, and indeed safer, method of hyperspace propulsion.

But no. With a shrug and a smile, the Doctor had shut up his toolbox and shaken the hand of the liner's chief engineer. The engineer had been remarkably helpful and accommodating for a human, albeit a little set in his ways. The captain of the liner had been very grateful too, but the Doctor had declined his offer of free passage to Antares with polite resolution.

It was not until the Doctor had actually seen the captain's cap badge that the mood of cheery congratulation had been broken. He could still picture the solid silver lettering now:

Star Racer

It was a name that had become infamous in the interstellar folklore of the 29th Century, in much the same way that the ocean-going *Titanic* had nine hundred years before. The *Star Racer* had been the galaxy's

largest, finest passenger space-liner: four and a half miles from bow to stern and a mile wide, capable of ferrying over a thousand people from earth to Antares in the utmost comfort. Beautifully appointed, superbly designed, immensely expensive - and utterly doomed.

The Doctor crossed to the section of the console chamber that housed the TARDIS library. A swift perusal of the densely packed shelves resulted in the selection of a slim volume entitled *GREAT DISASTERS OF THE SPACEWAYS* by Hubert Menmuir. He switched the book on and selected the entry on the *Star Racer* from its memory index.

'On the twenty-first of September 2897,' he read, 'the luxury passenger liner *Star Racer* disappeared mid-voyage between Sol and Antares. It had successfully made the transition to hyperspace after leaving Pluto's orbit and was never seen again.'

The Doctor took the book to his high-backed armchair and sat down to read more.

'All 1056 people on board the *Star Racer* are presumed to have perished. Exactly what happened to the vessel remains a mystery to this day, but salvage experts believe that the space-liner fell victim to a hyperspatial singularity known as a 'wormhole', a hitherto hypothetical phenomenon peculiar to supralight travel.'

The Doctor winced at the author's ingenuousness and switched the book off. Wormhole indeed! The 'hitherto hypothetical phenomenon' could only be one thing: a rift in the localised space-time continuum that could snatch a ship from hyperspace and toss it into the vortex in less than a second. Like floating icebergs, these rifts were a rare but perfectly natural hazard.

Or so he had thought. Natural? The Doctor felt the heavy weight of responsibility pressing on his shoulders. He recalled telling one of his human companions a long time ago that it was impossible to alter history: the progress of the universe was an inexorable journey through Time, or so he had thought then. Experience had subsequently proven him, well, if not entirely mistaken, then at least somewhat innocent in the ways of the cosmos. The timelines were not immutable; they could be altered, broken even, by the intervention of a factor that existed

outside of a particular timeline. Such as himself. Thus it would be possible to, say, go back in time and kill (for instance) the mother of (for instance) Grace Holloway before Grace was born and therefore prevent her even being conceived. A temporal anomaly that major would have severe, if not actually catastrophic, consequences for the local space-time continuum. But the Doctor also knew that Time was a capricious and unpredictable mistress. He sometimes liked to believe that there was no one more experienced than he was in time travel, but not even he knew all the answers. That was what made everything so interesting.

But this *Star Racer* business was worrying him. A nasty thought had struck the Doctor as he shook the hand of the *Star Racer*'s young captain: what if he had been repairing the space-liner's inherent supralight drive malfunction which had caused the rift in hyperspace and resulted in the infamous destruction of the ship? And what would happen now that the Doctor had interfered and repaired it before disaster struck?

The Doctor leapt up from this seat and hurried to the control console. No, it couldn't be.... If he had saved the ship, and the liner had completed its journey to Antares, then there would never have been an entry in Hubert Menmuir's lurid book on space disasters. The *Star Racer* must have perished despite his intervention!

But then another thought came to him: what if it had been his interference that caused the rift in the first place? That was almost worse! Had he accidentally condemned the ship and all its passengers to fly straight into Menmuir's wormhole in hyperspace? Was he the fate which 'remains a mystery to this day'?

The thought of all those lives on his conscience, not to mention their families and loved ones, was too much to bear. There had to be another explanation.

The Doctor pulled the brake on one of the console panels and watched the glowing rotors in the central glass column slow to a standstill. Then he quickly reprogrammed the co-ordinate settings and set the TARDIS in motion again. He had to be sure. He had to go back and find out exactly what had happened to the *Star Racer*.

The TARDIS materialised a few minutes later, the monochrome television monitor hanging overhead flashing up the words WARNING - HYPERSPATIAL ORBIT.

'I know, I know,' muttered the Doctor, pushing the monitor back up and away on its Z spring. He returned his attention to the controls. There was no indication of any temporal feedback, no sign of the sort of chronic disturbance that usually accompanied any interference with the natural course of Time.

But he had to see it for himself.

He activated the scanner, and the chamber ceiling turned into a huge panorama of the surrounding hyperspace. The TARDIS was positioned relatively close to the *Star Racer*: he could clearly see the liner and its colourful Doppler-effect wake.

Then it happened.

The rift opened up, briefly and spectacularly, a hundred different colours flooding through hyperspace like spilt paint. The *Star Racer* visibly distorted in the sudden gravity storm as the basic laws of the physical universe turned elastic. The ship was wrenched out of its hitherto immutable position in the space-time continuum and flung - where?

It was over as quickly as it had begun.

The maw of the wormhole clamped shut, leaving the surrounding hyperspace untouched. Gradually, without the warping effect of the *Star Racer*'s supralight engine, the hyperspatial bending of time-space relaxed and the TARDIS was left floating in normal space. The Doctor was left staring up at the deep blackness of the universe between the stars.

He continued to stare into the void where the space-liner had existed only moments earlier. In his mind's eye he could picture the faces of the crew as they realised what was happening: those final few seconds stretched to breaking point as the full impact of the ship's total destruction made itself known to every individual aboard.

The captain would have thought of his ship, and his passengers - but perhaps he would also have time to think of his family on Earth, the proud mother and father who would never see him again and always

associate the taste of champagne with the loss of their only son's life.

The chief engineer would have crossed himself quickly and instinctively: the Doctor had not failed to notice the silver crucifix around his burly neck. Did he have a family too? Did he pray for himself or for his loved ones?

The passengers, every last one of them, would witness the approach of their own deaths. Husbands and wives would reflexively hug their children and, perhaps, spare one last second to look at each other and realise that they could not, and would never, hold each other again.

And the children would grasp their cuddly toys and look up to their parents for protection, only to receive none.

The Doctor switched off the viewer and leant heavily on the console, concentrating his attention on the instruments. It hadn't been an engine fault that had instigated the disaster, or his interference. The *Star Racer* had chanced upon a tiny fault in the fabric of hyperspace, its own mass causing it to rupture.

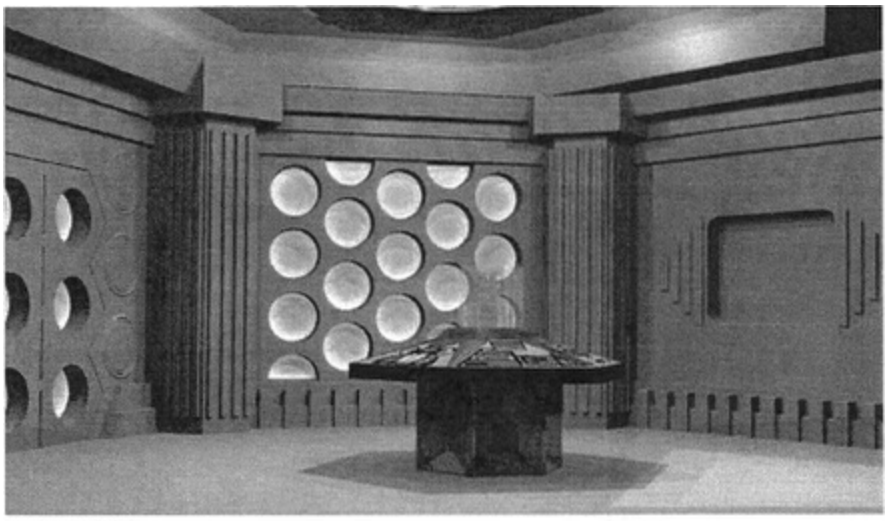
He had wanted to help, of course. Over a thousand souls lost forever in one mighty, stupid moment when nature found a loophole in the laws of physics. He had wanted to go back, avert the disaster, save those lives.

But it couldn't be done. It wasn't right, let alone possible, any more than he could go back to Earth in 1912 and warn the captain of the Titanic about icebergs.

But it had been hard to stand by and just watch it happen. No disaster was meant to be a spectator event.

He remembered the firm, dry handshake of the liner's chief engineer, the grateful look in the eyes of its captain. He had touched those two lives, however briefly, and through them the lives of all those onboard the vessel.

For once the Doctor was grateful to be travelling alone. The TARDIS could seem huge and empty at times, but now he was relieved not to have to answer the questions of a human companion, or meet an accusing stare.



CHRIS SUTOR

The Memory of Stones

JAMES MIDDLEDITCH

I

In the silence, Josef heard the voice once again.

Let the music consume you, it said. Let the music cradle your broken mind, wrapping, binding, softly caressing the poor, distorted pieces of what has been left.

The pain cannot touch you if you surrender to the music.

The ghosts of the past will lay down and sleep, as will your agony, the sounds that invade your mind in the silence.

Let it go, Josef. The ghosts are calling to you, but do not hear them. Hear me instead.

Hear the music. Hear the music. Hear the music. Hear the music....

Clutching his head in his twisted, bandaged hands, Josef surrendered and let the music embrace him.

Ace leant back on the rough stone wall, looking into the sunset over the lake and breathing deeply. The air was cold, and she could smell damp leaves, recent rain, and, drifting on the wind, burning wood. The low, golden sun reflected on the water, which turned a deep blue as it neared the castle behind her. Evening was falling fast, and the river was mirroring its arrival, paving its way.

Ace let the chilly breeze drift over her as she waited for the Doctor to return. Today had been one of their days apart. They had been travelling without the TARDIS for almost a month now, and as they had made their way across the broken remains of post-war Europe, they had begun to appreciate each other's need for solitude once in a while.

The TARDIS had landed in a wood just outside Berlin, in mid-September 1945. They had explored the grey, rubble-strewn city for a while, before beginning the slow journey here, to Krakow, Poland.

Ace thought it was a beautiful city, despite the scars. Like Berlin, it

had been badly damaged during the War. But unlike the German capital, which still pulsed like an undead heart with troops from both East and West, Krakow rested gently and reflected on what had happened. The politics and soldiers of postwar Europe were still present of course, but the people of Poland were still too tired to acknowledge them. They moved through the streets with a wide-eyed expression of exhausted sadness, quietly, slowly, gently, as if afraid that their fragile city would crumble and collapse at any sudden movement.

Ace had come here, to the castle, a number of times since their arrival in the city. It was old, standing tall and proud against the darkening sky. The dark brown stone glowed in the orange light of the dying sun, and the turrets rose high to meet the coming night.

There were legends of dragons here. Around the corner from where Ace stood, there was a cave where the famous dragon of Krakow had once lived and terrorised the locals. Ace smiled at the irony - she had come full circle.

She saw the Doctor's shadow first as he rounded the corner. She was momentarily startled; the shadow was long, and she could hardly believe it was coming from the little man who was swinging his umbrella as he walked towards her.

'Hello, Ace,' he said.

'Hi. You OK?'

'Yes. I've had a rather interesting day.'

Ace smiled inwardly. She looked forward to these reunions after their occasional days apart, and the Doctor never disappointed her with his stories.

'Oh yeah?' she prompted.

'Yes. Some intriguing rumours seem to be floating around some of the people here.'

'Oh it's not the dragon is it? Come on, Professor, we've done that one.'

'No, Ace,' he said, indulging her. 'Something a little less corporeal than a dragon, and a little more human.'

She looked at him for more clues, but he just stared past her at the horizon, where the last vestiges of sunlight bled into the dark blue sky.

'Ghosts?' she asked, excited despite herself. This had been a more ordinary, calmer adventure than their usual ones: simply an exploration of Earth's history. She had seen the Second World War from a few perspectives now, and had begun to feel a connection to the era somehow. Perhaps it had been her friendship with Kathleen - no, not Kathleen, Nan. Nan... So she had asked the Doctor to show her more. She was initially surprised when he had told her it was late 1945, after the end of the War in Europe. She had soon realised however that she would learn far more in the aftermath than she would in the actual conflict. And, touchingly, the Doctor had said he could keep her safer that way, if not from the harsh reality of human suffering that she would witness, then at least from the even harsher reality of bullets and bombs. It had been a while since anything 'unearthly' had happened to her. I suppose I'm about due, she thought.

'Yes, Ace. Ghosts.' She could detect the interest in his voice too.

'So where are they then?'

'Two guesses: a place and a time.'

'Graveyard, midnight.'

'Cliched, but correct. Off we go.' He looked at his watch. 'We've got plenty of time for a cocoa or two before we have to get there.'

He had already started to walk away, and Ace, wishing more for a pint than a cocoa, turned to follow him. They left the castle, watching alone as the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, giving the cold, starry sky up to the night at last.

As midnight approached, Josef's exhaustion overcame him. He knew that if he stopped the music now, he could fall onto his hard bed and sleep in blissful darkness for an hour or so, not giving the voice a chance to reach him.

Continuing to stare blankly through the open door, he prepared to make his move.

The Jewish cemetery was bathed in pale light seeping from an almost-full moon.

Ace hesitated at the entrance before slowly stepping through. Instantly, she could feel the place closing in around her.

There were so many stones. They were all placed closely together, all the same size, standing almost as tall as her, shining in the moonlight. The walls of the cemetery rose high around her. As she looked at them, she could see that they had been built from the broken remains of more gravestones. There was little room for grass or vegetation, the comforting signs of life that warmed the graveyards of Britain. Instead, scattered everywhere, especially on the narrow tops of the gravestones, were small pebbles. Almost all the graves had at least a small pile, while some were covered.

Stone. Cold, hard stone, glowing white all around her. Ace could feel the memories and the emotions contained in the stone, just as she had at Gabriel Chase before she had burnt it to the ground. 'Stone remembers,' The Doctor had once told her. Ace knew that this was true - she could feel the stone remembering here, now.

The Jews of Krakow would have come here after the Holocaust had finally ended, as they returned, shell-shocked and unbelieving to the place from where they had been torn. They would have come here and

found the graves of their friends and relatives smashed by the cruel, wretched hands of their tormentors. The memories of the dead, cast in stone, as broken as they were.

They would have wept, some alone, others together, a hard knot of understanding binding them as one in unspeakable pain.

Perhaps their tears had turned to stone, Ace thought, collecting on the tops of the graves and falling into the spaces in between.

'Ace, are you all right?' the Doctor asked.

'Yeah,' she said, sighing. 'I've seen these places in the daylight - I never expected them to feel so... dark at night.'

'They are extraordinary places,' he said quietly.

'No wonder there are rumours,' Ace said in a hard voice. 'I bet there *are* ghosts here, waiting for some Nazi bast-'

'Ace,' the Doctor interrupted. 'Not here.'

She looked down, calming herself.

The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder. 'The Jews would not say these things lightly,' he said. 'They are not willing believers in the undead.'

'Even after all they've been through? Restless, tortured souls looking for revenge? I'd find that easier to believe in than anything else.'

They were silent for a while, standing in the moonlight, unsure of what to do. Then Ace bent down to the grave next to her and said, 'OK, help me read this. Tell me their names. I want to know all of their names.'

Before the voices could return to fill the space in his head where the music had been, Josef fell asleep. Sleeping, at last, he dreamt.

They were a little way through the graves when the ghosts came to them.

They moved slowly, detaching themselves from the pale light cast upon the stones. They tilted their heads on their painful, thin necks, staring inquisitively with their sunken eyes at the Doctor and Ace, who had stopped, and were now looking calmly back at them.

The apparitions walked slowly, falteringly towards them. They were all unsteady on their feet, but they supported each other. One stumbled

and fell, and the others picked him up, holding on to him tightly. They held out their frail arms to one another and grasped each other firmly. Not one of them was alone.

There were many of them now, spectres of light against the darkness, or perhaps the other way around. They had surrounded the Doctor and Ace from all sides.

They seemed to be of all ages. There were women and children, holding the hands of blank-faced, unshaven men. An elderly woman stood before Ace with her hand on a young girl's shoulder. They had the same expression of tired sadness on their faces; an expression of pain and tragic acceptance that spanned the generations and made them look more alike than different.

The Doctor had grasped Ace's hand, and slowly, they straightened themselves.

The graveyard was silent. No one moved. The wind tugged at the Doctor's scarf and at Ace's overcoat, but it did not touch the semi-solid figures surrounding them.

The Doctor spoke, breaking the unnerving, gently rustling calm. 'Why are you here?' he asked softly, sadness and compassion lacing his voice.

The wind picked up slightly, and seemed to give breath to the pale figures.

'He brought us here,' they said in unison, a multitude of different voices combined into one.

'Who did?' the Doctor asked.

'He did,' the ghosts replied, their voices cracking in pain. 'He did.'

They were bowing their heads now, and they held each other tighter, closer, reaching out to one another blindly.

'Who?' the Doctor said, his voice stronger.

'The one that survived,' they said through their quiet, low sobs. 'The one that will not let go. The one that will not rest.'

'What is his name? Where is he?'

The ghosts raised their tired faces to the Doctor, tilting their heads again sadly. Their gaze shifted towards Ace, then past her to her right. The Doctor and Ace followed their eyes to the ghosts standing there.

A boy, no more than ten, was being pushed gently forward by the

others around him. Their hands were on his shoulders, and he stepped forward uncertainly. He stared straight at the Doctor.

'He is still there,' the ghosts replied, although Ace believed she could hear the voice of the boy slightly louder than the others.

'Where?' the Doctor whispered.

'In hell,' they replied. 'Auschwich.'

The Doctor's eyes widened. 'What is his name?'

The boy looked straight at Ace, and when he spoke, she could hear him clearly, the other voices just a background whisper, a soft, broken edge to his words. 'Josef Koster,' he said. 'My father.'

Ace could see tiny, shining tears on his face, but as she leant down to wipe them away, he slowly faded and disappeared. Only the tears remained, falling as raindrops onto the ground of the empty, moonlit graveyard.

II

It had taken them almost two days to reach their destination. They had walked most of the way, occasionally hitching a lift from a passing army vehicle heading in the general direction. The Doctor had worked his magic as usual, convincing the soldiers of his military importance.

Their journey had been tense. As they had walked, Ace had felt that every step was taking them closer to an inevitable and difficult confrontation. She preferred it when these things happened in an instant, when adrenaline and instinct took over to help decide the outcome. This was painful, as though she were stuck in slow-motion. Too much time to think.

Perhaps it was because she knew that she was heading in the same direction as millions before her, who had been taking their last, terrified journey towards execution. The thought of it made her eyes prickle with tears and she struggled to keep control. The Doctor needed her to be strong.

'We must find him,' the Doctor had said firmly as they left the Jewish cemetery. 'This is such a fragile time in human history. These... ghosts must be laid to rest. Nothing must be allowed to interfere at this point.'

Ace had decided not to question him; he had seemed so certain of

what he was saying, and she wasn't even sure whether he had been talking to her at all.

On the first evening of their journey, they had slept in a deserted barn - well, Ace had slept, while the Doctor had sat in the light of the fire they had built, keeping watch, thinking, preparing; Ace did not know.

'Have you ever seen it?' Ace had asked.

'No,' the Doctor replied, staring into the fire.

This admission had the strange effect of making Ace feel both better and worse at the same time. While it was good that for once they were in a situation in which the Doctor was closer to her level of experience and understanding, it unnerved Ace to think that he might be working blindly, for this was something that rarely, if ever, happened.

'I have seen places like it on other worlds,' the Doctor continued, 'but never here, on Earth.' He was silent for a while as the wind howled through the barn and the fire flickered and danced before them. 'Sometimes I think I have seen it. I've seen so much evil in the Universe, I sometimes feel as though I have seen all there is to see.' He sounded tired. Then he asked, 'Why did you want to come here, Ace?'

'The ghosts said -'

'No, not here specifically - to this time, this era, these dark years of your history. Why do you want to expose yourself to this? Why torment yourself? You're so young - you don't have to see all this.' He sounded agitated now.

Ace waited a moment before she replied, then she looked hard into his face. 'Shall I tell you why, Doctor? Because I've seen evil too. I've looked into the eyes of Fenric - an evil since the dawn of time, you said. How many humans have done that and survived? Pure evil, yes, but to me, it was alien evil. Not human evil.'

The Doctor just stared at her, frowning. God, she hated it when he looked at her like that. She almost felt embarrassed, ashamed at what she was saying, as though she were a child trying to explain science to a professor. No, not this time. Not any more. 'I want to understand what it's all about. Why evil people do what they do. Why they must be

fought. I want to know why people *choose* to be evil - not because they are evil, like Fenric, but because of real, human reasons.

'Since the Cheetah Planet, I've felt this... power... inside me. A strength, a force, I don't know what. But I know that I can use it. I know that I can fight. The potential is there, Doctor, inside me. I need to know that if I do fight, I'll be fighting for the right reasons, against the right people. Things used to be so black and white. I used to struggle against anyone who didn't think the same as me. But you've taught me different. You've taught me that I have a responsibility. Especially now.'

The Doctor's face had softened, and without her noticing, he had drawn closer to her. 'Oh, Ace,' he said, I'm sorry.'

'It's OK,' she replied, before hugging him tightly, burying her head in his jumper.

As he hugged her back, he stared into the flames. 'Oh Ace,' he whispered. 'What have I done to you?'

It was stark in its simplicity. Beyond the large, black, wrought iron gates, the Auschwitz concentration camp stood in the watery sunlight.

Ace had expected something else, somehow. She had expected it to be less... subtle. She had expected the buildings to be black and jagged, the roads to be made of a dark bog with dying and decaying vegetation rising out of it.

But instead, it was so simple.

The roads were made of dry, beige mud. The buildings were low, and made of plain brown bricks. There were trees dotted alongside them.

There were signs of what it really was, of course. Rows of barbed wire streaked off into the distance, and the windows of the buildings were barred.

The normality of the place was what terrified Ace. If someone did not know where they were, or what had happened here, would they even stop to take notice? Or would they feel the darkness, as Ace did? The pressure, emanating from the quiet, cold complex behind the gates, pressing on her chest and on her face. The cold lump of knowledge that throbbed in the pit of her stomach. The sadness that numbed her mind and made her eyes ache with dry, uncried tears. The

distant echo of death and pain that had been soaked into the mud, the trees, the bricks, the barbed wire, the gates, even the sky. Would all this ever go away? Could anyone come here, throughout the entire future of mankind, and not be touched by it? An evil not from the dawn of time, but an evil born, fed and nurtured here, by humans, in the middle years of the twentieth century.

It was unlike anything Ace had ever felt before, and ever would again.

'Doctor,' she said.

He said nothing in return as he stared intently beyond the gates, his eyes shining the deepest, coldest blue.

The Doctor led the way as they explored the perimeter. This part of the camp was silent and deserted.

'He could be anywhere,' Ace said. 'How are we going to find him?'

'We'll find him,' came the only reply.

Their fruitless search continued for another hour, before they sat down to rest on a small ridge of mud. The Doctor's keen eyes scanned the camp for any signs of life.

Tired, both physically and mentally, Ace turned away to look at the wilderness behind them, stretching to the horizon. It was late afternoon now, and the muted light of evening was already beginning to drift across the sky from the east. The persistent cold wind blew hard at her face, stinging her cheeks and her ears, bringing with it... a sound. A sound, being carried on the wind from somewhere in the distance. Indefmable, twisted, distorted, and definitely a sound that should not be here in this deserted, barren place.

'Doctor, can you hear that?' she asked, getting up and walking down the slope away from the camp.

'What?' He got up and followed her, cocking his head into the wind. 'Yes, I hear it. What on Earth is it?'

'It sounds horrible,' Ace said. 'It doesn't belong here - it can't be natural.'

'No, it's not.' He looked between the direction of the sound and the camp. 'Do we investigate?'

Eager to get away from the camp, if only for a little while, Ace said,

'Yes.'

They set off against the wind, towards the source of the sound.

It was almost unbearable now. It writhed and thrashed inside Ace's head, making her spine shudder and her ears throb in protest. It screamed, in pitches high and low, always in the worst imaginable combination. Then it would distort, vibrating as it changed key, the volume intensifying as it seared into her brain and scratched the inside of her skull.

They were almost at the entrance of a small brick hut, standing alone in the scrubland.

The Doctor turned to see Ace, her face screwed up in pain, her hands clamped desperately over her ears. He ran back to her and prised a hand away from her head. 'Stay here!' he shouted into her ear. She looked as though she was about to protest, but the sound was too much, and she forced her hand back to her head, nodding.

Retreating at a run, she watched the Doctor disappear into the hut, ready to join him as soon as the nightmarish sound was cut off.

The Doctor's face was twisted in pain as he entered the single room of the hut.

Ignoring the man who was sat, staring blank-faced at the doorway, the Doctor went straight towards the pile of machinery in one of the corners. The pile rose higher than him, and was made of several different components. They were all joined together with tendrils of wire and lead, melded into a new, twisted creation. They all had dials and displays, and the Doctor guessed that they were radios and audio equipment salvaged from different sources, probably military ones. They had been bound together to emit static and feedback, forced to work together to create this insane cacophony.

His eyes darting across the displays and leads, the Doctor located the power source. Whipping his hand away from his ear he bent down, and in one fluid movement, he pulled the plug from the generator.

The sound cut off instantly, leaving a roaring silence in its place.

Taking a moment to recover from the shock of the sound and the sudden silence, the Doctor turned slowly to the man, who was still

staring out of the door. His eyes were widening, his face coming to life, his head turning slightly from side to side in confusion.

'Josef Koster?' the Doctor said, wondering if the man could hear him, let alone recognise the name.

The man looked at the Doctor, then at his dead equipment.

Ace appeared in the doorway.

The silence was torn apart once again by the man as, suddenly and uncontrollably, he began to scream.

III

'Listen to me, Josef.'

No, Josef listen to me. Listen to the music.

'I can help you, Josef.'

I can help you, Josef. Take refuge in me and return to music.

'Stop screaming, Josef, and listen to my voice.'

Listen to the music.

'There's nothing here to hurt you.'

He'll hurt you, Josef, he'll make you remember. Don't remember, Josef please. Hide from him, make him go away.

'I'll help you, Josef, I'll help you heal. You won't need to hide anymore. Stop screaming, and let me help you. Listen to my voice.'

Listen to my voice, listen to the music.

'Look at me.'

Listen to me.

'Look at me.'

Listen, Josef please!

'Look at me.'

Listen!

'I'm real, Josef. Listen to my voice. Look at me.'

You will listen! You will obey! Surrender to the music!

'No more pain, Josef. No more screaming. You're not alone any more.'

LISTEN!

'That's right. Look at me. Take my hand.'

Ace was transfixed, watching in horror and fascination as the Doctor's soft words began to break through the harsh screaming.

Slowly, the sound faltered, becoming a breathless, husky moan. Finally, the man tore his eyes away from the door, through which Ace could sense the presence of the Auschwitz camp as it sat, quiet yet malign, polluting the air and the ground with its foul history. As the man finally turned his eyes to the Doctor, the sounds stopped. Then he held out a bandaged hand, which the Doctor took, very gently, in his own.

It had taken an hour before Josef would speak to them. He had sat, staring first at the Doctor, then eventually at Ace, and then around the rest of the room. It was as though he were looking at it for the first time.

Ace had found a bundle of candles in a set of drawers, and she had placed them around the room and lit them. They gave the stark, dusty room a soft orange glow.

Ace studied the man carefully. He looked to be in his fifties, although his skin and the look on his face suggested that he had been ravaged by something more than just the passing of time. His hair had once been the darkest black, but it was now streaked with grey. It was short and wild around his small face, and looked as though it had not been washed for months. His skin was dark, a mixture of natural tan and dirt. He was undeniably Jewish. Ace cursed herself for making this distinction; she had never made it when she was young, only when she was older, after comments by her mother of 'they're Jewish', or 'he's definitely a Jew, look at that nose'. Suddenly she had found herself taking note of them, picking them out in a crowd, and she had been frustrated that the process could not be reversed.

Josef was very thin. Ace guessed that he must only weigh about six stone. She wandered what he had been eating all this time. Perhaps if he had been in the camp, he could get away with eating very little.

She had sat patiently on the floor in the corner, while the Doctor sat holding his hand, waiting for him to speak.

'Who are you?' he asked, eventually. He spoke with a Polish accent, and his voice sounded sore and husky.

'Friends,' the Doctor replied. 'We've come to help you. How long have you been here like this?'

'I don't know. I came back, you see. We had been freed from... *there*. But I had nowhere else to go. So I came back.' His eyes had wandered back to the door, which Ace had pulled closed in a futile attempt to block out the presence of the nearby camp.

'What are you afraid of, Josef?' the Doctor asked.

He thought about this. 'Many things.' He looked down at his hands. 'I'm afraid of the silence. I'm afraid of the voice that talks to me when it goes quiet.'

'Is that why you listen to this?'

'The music, yes. The voice tells me to listen to the music. The music helps block out the sounds in the silence.'

'What sounds?'

'The sounds that echo from the past. I can hear them... so clearly. It's as if I'm still there.'

'What are they?'

'They are the sounds of war, and pain, and death and evil. They are the sounds of pure suffering. The tortured, and their torturers. The murdered and their murderers. I can remember every sound that I have heard since the soldiers came and took us from our home. Every sound. They come to me in the silence, so I take shelter in the music.'

The Doctor's face was creased in concentration and sorrow. 'What happened, when they came to take you?'

Josef took a deep breath before speaking. 'There was a moment,' he said, 'a single moment, when something happened. Something happened in here.' He tapped his head with his hand. 'In this moment, I could hear everything going on around me. I could hear the Nazi soldiers. Their boots. Their shouts. I could hear their tanks, creaking and rumbling through the streets. I could hear their guns echoing around the buildings. I could hear crying. I could hear men, women and children screaming in terror and desperation. I could hear people falling, people dying. I could hear blood dripping onto the ground. I could hear the city falling apart around us. I could hear the buildings, crying tears of rubble. I stood, and heard all this, and in that single moment, the sounds... harmonised. They became perfect, pure. I understood what they were and what they meant. My mind opened to

that realisation, and from that moment on, I watched in silence and absorbed every sound I heard, remembering, reliving.'

The Doctor nodded grimly. 'They took you from Krakow, didn't they?'

Josef sighed. 'Yes.'

'And they put you in the Auschwitz camp?'

'No, not then. I was rounded up with my family; my wife, our son and our daughter. We were put into a truck. There was about thirty of us in all. We drove for miles, before the soldiers just stopped. We were near some woods, and they led us to the edge. They told us to dig.'

Across the room, Ace shuddered. She knew what was coming.

'When the digging was finished, we were told to get in. The sunlight was streaming through the trees, it was a beautiful day. I remember thinking then that I didn't mind that I was going to die. I held my wife's hand, and my son's hand. We all held hands, all of us in the pit. I could feel the fear, and the sadness, and the knowledge that we were going to die, through my hands, pressing inside my head. We waited to die.'

'What happened?'

'The guards spoke into their radios. They had been called away. Before they left, one of them fired at us, just for a few seconds. Half of us fell. I felt them die. I felt their pain, in the moment before their hands left the chain. The guards drove away, leaving the rest of us standing there, in the pit. My wife, my son, my daughter, had survived with me.

We stayed in the pit for an hour or more, unable to move, unable to let go of each others' hands. No one came, and evening fell. So we ran. The others scattered in all directions, I don't know what happened to them. My family and I went deeper into the woods. We found an old mill. We went inside, found a perfect hiding place. So we stayed there, hiding, for the next year.'

'Then you were found?'

'We were found. And we were taken to hell. To *there*.' He nodded towards the door. He closed his eyes, tears escaping from the corners. His voice was very rough now, and he looked exhausted.

'I want to sleep,' he said. 'But if I sleep, I will dream. I will dream of my friends, and my family, all those who didn't make it. They will come

back again. Will you help me sleep? Will you stay here with me?'

'Yes, I'll stay, Josef,' the Doctor said.

'If you speak to me while I go to sleep, perhaps I will not dream of them. Perhaps they will rest tonight. Perhaps I will dream of you, of your life. Tell me about it as I fall asleep.'

The Doctor looked over at Ace, an awkward frown passing over his features for a moment. But she had already fallen asleep, overcome after their long journey and the emotions she must be feeling. He stood up, walked over to her, and pulled a rough blanket over her. Then he returned to Josef.

'Sleep now, Josef. I'll tell you about my life, and when you wake in the morning, I will still be here.'

Josef had closed his eyes, and the Doctor, bathed in the soft golden light of the candles, began to speak.

The candles had spluttered and gone out long before Ace awoke. Pale, watery light was streaming through the single window. She blinked a few times, and then got her bearings. She jumped up suddenly, disoriented.

The Doctor turned around slowly, his finger on his lips. 'Shhhh,' he said.

Ace tutted at him, and at herself. She should not have fallen asleep, but at least she could have woken up to find the Doctor in mortal danger or something, not with his finger on his lips saying 'Shhhh' like a bloody old woman.

Josef was sleeping in the chair beside the Doctor. He looked peaceful.

The Doctor got up quietly and walked towards the door, motioning for Ace to follow him. She stretched, then walked out into the early morning air.

'What are we going to do with him then? I presume he's causing the ghosts in Krakow?'

'Yes,' the Doctor replied, 'he is.'

'How? Why?'

'He is a psychic, quite a powerful one. He can read emotions, especially through physical contact, and he has total recall of every

instance in his life, ever since that moment when they came for him. He also happens to have had a severe mental breakdown. The combination is a bad one. His mind is in pieces. He is transmitting his dreams back to his home. When he sleeps, he remembers those he lost during the Holocaust. He obviously has a strong connection to Krakow, and especially the cemetery we visited - a piece of him is still there, and when he remembers his pain, and those who died, the memories burst through into reality.'

He turned away, looking into the grey sky of the dawn. 'Of course that's the logical explanation,' he said quietly. 'They could be just what they appear to be - ghosts. Ghosts that *must* be allowed to rest, for his sake and the sake of the future. Once upon a time I would never have considered that this could be true. But now....'

'Why the terrible sounds? And the voice he hears?'

'The voice is his own, the piece of himself that wants protection from the memories. The 'music' as he calls it, is the result of that - if he listens to that, there is no way he can hear the sounds that are stuck in his head. I think his real problem is that time has not caught up with him. With so many vivid memories inside him, he cannot see that it is all over. He is stuck in his own, personal past, at the point where it was most cruel to him. He cannot move on.'

'Is there any way of repairing the damage?'

'I don't know. What he experienced was the worst thing a sensitive mind should be put through. He could feel the pain and fear of all those around him. Sometimes he could feel them die - no human mind should experience that. He was right in the centre of the greatest concentration of cruelty, brutality and murder this world has ever seen.'

'So what can we do? We can't stay here and look after him forever, however much we want to.'

'I've been thinking about that. And there is something we can try. I don't know if it will work. It will be difficult for him.'

'What?'

'I need your help with this, Ace. I need you to go to Krakow, and find something for me, if it's there.'

When they returned to the room, Josef had awoken, and had needed

to be calmed down again, believing they had left him. He had wanted to reconnect the equipment and listen to it again, but the Doctor had stopped him. They were back now, in familiar positions: Josef in his chair, the Doctor kneeling beside him.

'Are you going to stay with me?' Josef asked.

The Doctor thought about what he was going to say. 'I'm going to stay with you for a little while. By that time, you will have become better. You won't need me anymore, but I will not leave you alone. Will you let me help you? So that one day soon, you can leave this place and never come back?'

Josef looked troubled, but slowly he nodded. 'Are you sure I will not be alone?'

'I promise.'

'Where is your friend?'

'She's gone on ahead. She's helping you too. She's getting things ready for when you're better.'

'What are we going to do until then?'

'We're going to talk. You've never spoken about your experiences, have you?'

'No.'

'You've only ever thought about them?'

'Yes.'

'Then tell me about them. And as you tell me, feel their clarity leave your mind. Share the memories with me, feel the pressure of them ease as you speak them. I know that you feel as though you cannot, and should not forget, but if you share them with me, I can help you carry them. Can you do that?'

'I think so.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Then, Josef, let's begin. Tell me what happened.'

IV

Evening was falling once more over Krakow.

Ace was watching it arrive from her familiar place at the castle. This would be the last time.

She checked her watch. Her week was up. It was time to begin.

Josef walked slowly through the dark, damp streets, the Doctor staying a respectful distance behind, watching him intently.

Josef was looking all around himself, his eyes wide. From the wet ground, he picked up a fallen leaf He held it in front of him, up to the light coming from the moon. Then he laid it carefully back down.

The Doctor looked at his watch. He was hoping that this was going to work. Timing was everything.

The cemetery was still moonlit. The full moon had passed a week ago, but the crescent remaining was still bright enough to make the stones glow softly.

Ace shivered. She wished the Doctor would hurry up. She watched the stones closely, waiting for the light to coalesce into human forms, waiting for the ghosts to return. If they did, then she would know that something had gone wrong.

Her companion was also shivering. He looked at Ace nervously, and she smiled unconvincingly back. 'I'm worried, Ace,' he said in a thick Polish accent. 'Are you sure this is the right thing to do?'

'Trust us, Peter. The Doctor knows what he's doing - you can help each other through this.'

She looked away from him towards the gate, willing the Doctor to come through, with or without Josef. Please, she thought, please let this be all right.

'It's time to go Josef,' the Doctor said gently.

They were standing in a dark street. Josef was watching the flickering light coming from the window of a tiny house. There was movement inside, and he watched enraptured, a slight smile on his face, tears in his eyes. Then he turned to the Doctor, the smile disappearing slowly. 'You're taking me to the cemetery aren't you?' he asked.

'Yes.'

The cemetery was silent as the four figures walked slowly towards each other. The Doctor had caught Ace's eye, and she had nodded at

him quickly. Telling that she was nervous, he smiled back at her. Then he turned to the man standing with her, and smiled at him. The man was young, a little older than Ace perhaps. He was tall and thin, and had the same tanned skin as Josef, his hair completely black. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

Josef moved away from the other three, into the centre of the cemetery. He turned away from them, looking at the graves, surveying the dark, glowing stones, looking for something. When he turned back, his eyes were full of tears.

'They should be here,' he said. 'This is where I've seen them, in my dreams. My friends. My family... Where are they? Where are they?'

The Doctor went to his side, and stared hard into his face. 'They've gone, Josef. They've never been here, not really. It's just your memories of them.'

'I can *hear* them,' he said in a strained whisper. 'I can still *hear* them! Take me back! Give me my music! You bought the silence back! You bought the pain back! The voice told me to hide from you, but you tricked me!' He was shouting, getting closer to the Doctor, his bandaged fists clenched, raised. The Doctor was backing away.

Ace stepped closer, ready to hold him back if he attacked. Damn, she thought. This was too risky. He's too far gone. Peter was standing behind her, watching them in confusion.

'You're ill, Josef, but this is your chance to get better,' the Doctor reasoned. 'I never said this would be easy. You've suffered so much, your mind is in tatters. But you've made progress since I've come - you've talked about it, realised that it's in the past.'

'What does it matter that it's in the past? It's still in here!' He tapped his head, hard. '*That place*. The cold. The smell of burning, always burning. The work. The torture. The shouting. The crying. Blank eyes, everywhere, staring out from Jews, Nazis, guns. The barbed wire. The mud. The *death*. Endless death. Endless, endless...'

He was crouched down on the floor now, hugging himself. The stones rose high around him, embracing him.

It's all right, Josef, I'm here.

His head snapped upwards, as if he could hear something.

I'll look after you. Trust me. Listen to my voice.

He started breathing faster, staring up into the darkness.

Take your revenge. End the pain. End the memories. Destroy.

Tears streamed down his cheeks. He shuddered.

Destroy the camp. Destroy yourself.

He rose.

Feel the power in your mind. Feel the power in the stones. The pain, the anger. Pure anger. Bring it together - your anger and the anger of all your people. It is encapsulated here, in the stones. Feel it, take it. Take your revenge. Destroy.

Raising his arms, he began to untie one of the bandages.

'Oh no,' the Doctor whispered.

'What's happening?' Ace shouted above the howling wind. 'What's he doing?'

'I think he can hear the voice again. I think he's about to do something terrible.'

Josef had taken one bandage off. It lay discarded on the ground.

'Josef, what are you doing? What is the voice telling you?'

He began to work on the other hand. 'I know how to end the pain now. I can destroy it. My pain, the camp.'

'What about me?' the Doctor shouted angrily at him. 'What about our progress. I helped you. I helped you deal with your pain.'

'You shouldn't have bought me back here.'

'You couldn't have stayed where you were, always in the shadow of that place. You would never have recovered.'

'I would have if you'd stayed with me.'

The Doctor was shocked. He looked at the ground, ashamed.

Destroy.

'I must fight the darkness, in the only way I can,' Josef said. 'I only ever wanted to fight the darkness. But how do you fight it when it's behind you, in the past?'

'Sometimes it's not about fighting the darkness,' replied the Doctor. 'Sometimes you just have to survive it. That's how you fight it. You don't let it take you down. You don't fall at its feet.'

Josef looked confused.

Destroy.

He looked pleadingly at the Doctor. 'There is so much pressure in my head. I can't contain it anymore. Back at the hut, with the music, I could keep control, just. Now I'm here. Home.'

Destroy.

'I'm sorry. There is nothing I can do.' He reached for the stones.

Far away, across the cold, wind-swept countryside of Poland, the Auschwitz concentration camp began to stir. The ground beneath it began to shake. The air around the buildings became thick, heavy, charged, while inside them, bare light bulbs began to flicker, illuminating cold, dead rooms with clinical white walls and barred windows. In the gas chambers, cracks began to appear in the floors and ceilings.

The moon shone down on the wilderness, and in the centre of it, the Auschwitz camp began to tremble in fear.

Ace was by the Doctor's side, while Peter stood behind them, fearful and confused.

'Can he do it, Doctor? Is he strong enough?' she asked.

'I'm afraid he is. I thought I'd helped him...'

'What will happen to the future if the camp is destroyed?'

'I don't know, Ace. I really don't know. But it will be bad.'

'Then what the hell do we do?'

Josef could feel the power of the stones making his fingertips tingle. His mouth curled into a slight smile. At last, this would end.

He looked calmly around as the cemetery began to dissolve around him, to be replaced by the dark, familiar buildings of the camp. It was shaking. Lightning was dancing in the sky above it

'I'm back,' he said. 'Neither of us should be here anymore. It's time to leave.'

Josef's eyes had glazed over, and his hands were dangerously close to the two nearest gravestones.

The Doctor looked around suddenly, scanning the cemetery. 'Stone,' he whispered. 'Ace! Find me the biggest slab of blank stone you can and bring it here now! You, what's your name?'

'Peter,' the young man replied, bewildered.

'Go with her. Run!'

While the pair disappeared into the gravestones, the Doctor took a deep breath. Calmly, he watched as Josef's hands hovered over the stones. The man was saying something, but the Doctor could not make it out.

'Hurry, Ace...'

Josef's hands plunged down.

Josef felt the stones connect with him, become part of him. He could feel their anger, melding with his own. His eyes blazed as he prepared to let it loose.

But then he felt something else.

He looked around. There was movement. There were people here, in the camp.

No, not people. Ghosts.

They walked from where the lightning lit up the walls and the trees. They stepped from the light on the fences and barbed wire. They moved towards one another, reaching out and grasping each other. Then they moved towards Josef.

He stared at them, recognising them, the burning anger inside him turning cold. They surrounded him, a circle of light and darkness, bound together, entwined.

'You don't want this,' the ghosts said. They spoke as one. 'We don't want this.'

'I'm doing this for you. For our people. I'm taking revenge.'

'It's too late for that.'

'It's not. I can feel the anger inside you. It's inside me too. We couldn't fight them before, we were too weak. They were stronger than us because they had weapons and numbers, and because they were evil. But now we are stronger. What they created in us will now destroy them.'

'There is nothing left to destroy. They are gone, beaten, fallen. They are the past.'

'But their legacy remains. This place. How can it continue to exist when it killed so many of us? How can that be allowed? It will forever

be a symbol to those who follow them. A reminder of what they are capable of. They may have fallen, but there will always be those who try to resurrect them. I'm not just fighting the past, I'm fighting the future. I'm making sure this doesn't happen again.'

'This place must remain. It must remain for the generations to come. It must remind them of what happened to us. How we suffered. And how we survived. This place itself will ensure that it never happens again. It will breed in those who see it a sadness, a sympathy so great that the evil that created it will never be able to rise again.'

Josef clutched his head in pain. 'I don't know what to do. I can't contain the pressure in my head. I can't go on.'

'The pressure in your head has changed now that we are here. Feel it.'

He did so. He looked inside himself, and could feel that the anger had been swamped. He could feel sadness, above all else. It was his own, released after months buried deep beneath the layers of turmoil in his mind - the music, the voice, the sounds, the anger. And now, it was joined by the sadness of the stones. He could feel the tears that had fallen upon them. Sadness. Just sadness.

'I don't know what to do,' he whispered.

'Look beyond this place, papa,' the ghosts said, one voice clearer than all the others. 'Go back. Leave this place forever. We're not here anymore. Go back...'

Josef began to cry, harder than he had ever done before, as the image of his son began to fade with the ghosts and the camp. The cemetery walls took the place of the fences and buildings, while the light of the ghosts became the light of the moon glowing on the gravestones.

Standing before him was the Doctor, the one who had listened to him, helped him. He could barely see him through the tears. His body was shuddering with pain and grief; he could hardly breath for the sobbing.

Through the roaring in his ears, he heard a calm, quiet voice.

'Stone remembers, Josef. Let go.'

Blinking, he could see another gravestone. It was blank.

And all the pain, all the sadness, all the pressure flooded out of him

as he finally let go.

The stone crackled and fizzed, sparking and smoking as Josef stared at it.

The Doctor, Ace and Peter watched as the stone changed. The force of Josef's mind was carving words upon its surface in tiny, perfectly formed letters. Names. So many names. For minutes the stone blazed and burned. The cemetery was alive with flickering white light.

And then it stopped. The new gravestone was complete, filled to its edges with Josef's inscriptions. Josef himself raised his eyes one last time to the Doctor, then slumped gently to the ground.

'You are his nephew?' the Doctor asked Peter.

'Yes. When Ace found me, I had thought I was the only one of my family who had survived. I knew my uncle and aunt had been taken, I heard they had gone to the Auschwitz camp. I worked in the Monowitz complex, about a mile and a half from the death camp. There was no way of knowing if they had survived. When we were liberated, I came back here. I went to their house every day to see whether they had returned. They had not.'

'And you're willing to look after him now?'

Peter looked worried. 'Is he safe? I've seen others go mad during my time at the camp, but never anything like that. What if it happens again?'

'Josef had a powerful... ability. A power, in his mind. His experiences caused it to grow, until the pressure was so much that he went mad. When he began to heal, the pressure needed release. Hence what happened here, tonight. I believe his powers have burnt out now. He was going to use his entire mind to destroy the camp, killing himself in the process. But he didn't - the potential energy was used to carve the stone, anything else is buried deep inside it, encapsulated where it can do no harm. All he really wants is to rest. I don't think he's slept properly for years. He needs looking after, building up.'

'None of us have slept properly for years, Doctor,' Peter said sadly. 'That's why we have to help each other. He is my family. He's part of me. I will not abandon him.'

'Good.'

'I'd better get him back to the house. It's cold.'

'Do you need a hand?' Ace asked.

'No. We'll go our own way from here. Thank you.'

As Ace said goodbye to Peter, the Doctor bent down to Josef who looked as though he was sleeping peacefully.

'I have to go now, Josef,' he whispered. 'I hope you can forgive me for leaving you. I hope you can forgive me for putting you through this, for gambling with your feelings and emotions so vastly. I could have stayed with you, made it easier for you, but that's not my role. I have to go on with my work, for the sake of others like you, and those who can help people like you. I have to go on. I will not forget you.' He touched Josef's hand gently then rose.

'Come on, Ace. I think it's time to go home.'

They were on the outskirts of Krakow, walking with the sun rising behind them. They had walked in silence since they left the cemetery.

'Can we rest for a while?' Ace asked eventually.

'Of course,' the Doctor replied.

They sat down on a stone wall that ran along the road. It disappeared further along as the grasp of the city weakened, letting the flat countryside of Poland take hold of the landscape. The Doctor pulled a thermos from from his satchel, and poured steaming cocoa into the lid. He took a tiny sip, and then passed it to Ace.

'Are you all right, Professor?' Ace asked him as she took the cup in her hands, warming them.

'I think so. It's been a long week.'

'This has all been a bit different for you, hasn't it?' she asked, watching him closely.

He turned, looking into the dawn. 'At some points in the past, I think I've hidden from humans, from Earth. I've spent years in space, travelling from planet to planet, meeting race after race. None of them are quite like yours. None of them have that same ability to amaze me one minute, and terrify me the next.'

'Terrify you?'

'Does that shock you?'

'I suppose not. Not after what Josef's told us. Could you have stayed with him, if he had begged you to?'

'No. I work on a bigger scale, Ace, but for the same purpose.' He looked hard into her face. 'Every time we make things better for a planet, a continent, a town, a single person, we make things better for countless others. We save the downtrodden, the abused, the broken. And we save those who can continue to do that in their everyday lives, after we have gone. Those who can lead the ones still in darkness back into the light. Those who help others, and carry on our work on the smaller scale - the scale that really matters. That's why we do what we do.

'And what about you Ace? Was the trip worthwhile? Has it helped in your quest for understanding?'

'Not of evil. I don't think I'll ever get any closer to understanding that. But maybe of good.'

The Doctor looked at her. 'Human good?' he asked.

'Human, and otherwise.'

He smiled at her, his face lit by the glowing dawn sky, and she smiled back,

It was warm and golden when Josef awoke. He was in a bed, a soft woollen blanket covering him, a large, plump pillow under his head. It smelt clean and new. Sunlight was pouring through a large window, making the room shine and sparkle.

He turned to see a man sitting on a chair in the corner, watching him, a kind smile on his face. He tried to get up, to speak.

'It's all right,' said the man, coming over to the edge of the bed. 'I know. It's good to see you, uncle.'

Josef nodded, looking amazed, and a little confused. 'Where is...?'

'They've gone. They said to say goodbye. They asked me to look after you.'

Josef nodded again, then lay back down on the soft pillow. He felt safe. He was safe, with family once more.

He thought then of the little man who had come to him and who had brought him back here, back home. Much of it was a blur, like a dream. But he remembered the man's face. His eyes, shining, so kindly. The

gentle touch of his hands. He had not known his name. He had not thanked him.

A tear began to ease its way gently from his eye, seeping into the pillow, dampening it.

Somehow, it didn't seem to matter that he had not said goodbye. He felt a sense of completion. He knew that he would not see the man again, not properly. Only in his mind, when he allowed himself to go back. Only in his memories.

Here Again

Nick Campbell

Autumn across the grounds. The smell of dead things, reassuring. The smell reaches out up off in to the sky, the scent of decomposition. Subtle rearrangement.

Flower arrangements, of dried flowers, along the edges of the paths and in the cracks between old stones. They rustle in occasional September breezes. September? Do you remember last September? Did you fall in love again? Do you remember, all the heat was drying out the world, crisping it up? The trees had oozed and swished enough. Now, like now, they were dying. Something romantic about death. I fell in love in September, asleep through autumn.

The sky is pale, blooming with white clouds, cracked all through with tiny blue-black shadows. It may rain later, as it may have rained yesterday. But everything looks so warm, so burned. The cool breath of evening seems out of place in early afternoon. But it's autumn, a process of transformation.

Just beneath the sky is a mass of gold and brown, paper leaves shifting and swaying.

Falling. One leaf, diving toward the black soil, the muddy grasses.

The Summerhouse has a roof covered in gold leaves, as if nature were trying to bury it. And inside it...

Ghosts in autumn. Striding through the grasses. Here. Ghosts.

Beside the fence, the air cracks open and a Police Box pushes through. Breezes blow against the blue, and dying sunlight lies desperately across the dappled glass windows, fading away. The light burns momentarily, as the noise dies away.

This is the TARDIS. It travels in time.

Beyond the fence rolls a broad sweep of vegetation, a field of rows: brilliant green, fizzing violently against the night-colour of the earth. From the field swoops the scent of life, of growth and gradual evolution. Distant in the dead sunlight is a scarecrow, a bunch of

clothes and a paper plate. A gentle breeze stirs the sleeve of a shirt and makes it wave, white-and-blue tartan flapping without an arm inside. Way above is a tiny sun, swaddled in blue air and pink clouds.

Sunset. The sun is heading down for the horizon, escape velocity of an endless gravitational swirl, ready to circuit around and swish back slower, dragged on strings, slipping in tracks like a marble on your arm.

The door swings open.

Someone dropped a cigarette, down here in the woods where nobody goes. A single streak of smoke twists from its ashy tip, turning on absent breezes, unravelling over invisible steps, dissipating as it climbs toward the brown shadows of the leaves' undersides.

Some time in the next year, the fire in the cigarette will catch in a leaf, travelling across them, gold eating gold, crackle overcoming crackle, light illuminating pale veins, making them white, turning them to ash: dead things dying for a second time, leaves leaving the afterlife.

Then whoosh!

Up goes the wood, a shower of sparks, awash with flame, an ocean of light, wave upon wave of heat and haze swirling within the shadow and the light Perhaps it will be this time next year. But what time will it be this time next year?

A shell inside the Earth, open and spilling its contents. Grass and dry Earth spill up its outside, but don't make it inside.

The Doctor pulls the brim of his hat down a little. The last of the sunlight is drooling across the landscape, just making its final lurch into his eyes. He doesn't want to be blinded. In a few moments, the wood will have cooled even further, swamped up with shadows. Still it will be a hot evening, balmy, sweaty, a time for parties and cake. And swimming in the old house's lake without any clothes on. He smiles at the memory.

'What was that?' asks Adric. The Doctor looks at him, not at the noise. And which noise, when there are so many to choose from? He looks taller, thinks the Doctor, and quieter. He used to be quite the little Artful Dodger. Since the change...

Since the change, everybody has changed. And everything. As if the whole universe has regenerated with him. Did it always happen, he wonders?

'Scared?' he asks.

'Of what?' There are shadows all over Adric's face, slipping into his eyes and down toward his mouth. 'Ghosts?'

'Did I say that?'

'Do you believe in ghosts?'

'Of course not,' replies the Doctor curtly. 'There all kinds of things alive in the wood, Adric. We don't need to go around imagining there's a spook after us, just to explain –'

Snap!

He looks around, slowly. Something small in the undergrowth, probably. Or one of the girls, a long way off. There's nobody else here with them.

'Yes?' The boy's smiling, teasing the shadows apart.

'To explain a twig snapping.' He smiles too, tightly. 'Yes, well, let's get on with it, shall we?' He jams both hands in pockets (to increase odds) and rattles and rumbles around in their contents. He feels coins, photos, scraps of paper, balls of string, balls of rubber bands, shells, fruit cores, chess pieces and ink cartridges jostling around in there, before he locates the tracking device in his left hand pocket and hefts it out into both hands. It's such a lash-up that he has to search it all over before he can decide how to turn it on.

'But whatever we're looking for,' says Adric, 'whatever it is we're following – well, it could do some strange things, couldn't it? Have some odd effects.'

'Nothing supernatural, I assure you,' replies the Doctor irritably. The machine starts whirring – somehow he must have turned it on. He waves it around generally, and checks the little LCD screen attached. The figures refuse to settle into anything recognisable, flighty fragments of Arabia but nothing definite. He shakes the device and thumps its side. Somebody nearby gives a laugh, light, high, girly. He turns his head, somewhat faster than he would have liked to appear to.

'Who was that?' asks Adric, stepping closer to the Doctor.

'One of the girls,' replies the Doctor, thumping the machine angrily.

'This thing isn't working, you know. Are you sure your standards aren't slipping? I'll have to switch that star for something more –'

'No, there was someone in white, over there. Look, is that her?'

The Doctor searches the area his companion gestures to. 'Where?'

All he sees are the trees, honeyed with a nigh-on extinct sunlight. The leaves flap, little green hands, but everything else remains resolute.

'Oh,' says Adric. 'No. No, she's gone. But she wasn't Tegan or Nyssa, she had fair hair.'

The Doctor frowns and takes his hat off suddenly, rolling it and shoving it in his pocket. Roughly, he passes the tracking device into his friend's hands. 'In my opinion you ought to be giving more attention to this. You're *obviously* settling into optimistic fantasy.'

Adric looks down at the device with a laugh. 'But I don't even know what this is supposed to do!' he says, grinning. 'All you did was ask me a lot of shamefully simple mathematical questions and mutter things about having headaches. If you tell me what we're supposed to be looking for, I can probably get this thing going, can't I?' The Doctor, bothered more than he'd like to think, stares into Adric's challenging eyes. Ah, he thinks, so you are still in there. Last life, he'd probably have hurled back some equally pretentious, arrogant confrontation. But what's the point? He lets out a smile.

'Yes,' he says. 'Of course.' A bird twitters above his head. He looks up at it. 'It's such a nice day, isn't it?' He wanders closer to the tree, peering up into the grey-brown branches. Perhaps there's a nest up there. He's sure he could be up to the highest branch in no time. What a view that would be. 'It was Nyssa who noticed it first. Some kind of discontinuity in the TARDIS' flight records, a corruption of a file. Not an error as such, but lots and lots of anomalous co-ordinates for this one area of space-time. I just wanted to get a bit closer to have a look, but something went wrong. We were sucked down to Earth. As it were.' He whips around suddenly. 'Understand?'

Adric is looking past him, beyond the tree, into the wood.

'Adric?'

Again he turns violently, swishing his hair a little. There's nobody

there. 'There's nobody there, Adric.' But then he hears footsteps, rustling in the leaves. He turns again, and Adric sprints past him, pushing the box of tricks into the Doctor's hands. The Doctor looks down, instinctively, and sees the thing is working as well as he'd hoped. The numbers are scrolling upwards and upwards, faster and faster, until they're a blur.

Something sparks at the back of the device, and he almost drops it. Instead, he watches as the unit appears to deflate; the joins melt, the batteries fail, the screen switches off, the sounds cease. It's a lump of dead metal in his hands, rapidly falling to pieces.

Adric is gone, he realises, as he stuffs the spare parts back into his pockets.

And it's spring.

Spring seems to have bled out from everything. There are furled buds and flat splashes of wick green on everything, as if a skin had been cut away. Everything looks raw and freshly opened up. Tegan feels almost careful about where she treads. The light and the colour and the scent of things growing, and that knife-scrape of cold breeze, they weren't surprising. They must have always been here, of course. Perhaps even since this morning.

But it is morning, isn't it? The sun has newly risen. There's dew on every blade of grass. She shakes her head suddenly.

The new light and the fresh colours and the powerful, nostril-smothering scent of things growing, and that knife-scrape of cold breeze, these weren't surprising. They were things she had to slip into, that's true enough, after the airless warmth of the TARDIS. Like trying on new clothes as the season changes (something perhaps the Doctor might have warned her to do). But it was the sudden spurt of birdsong. Birdsong is at the core of spring, the centre around which it coils, like the magnet in an electromagnet. When the birds start singing, winter is dead, no matter what the weather is or how it's been in the past.

It startled her, bursting out of everywhere, bubbling from every space. Low, shrill, high, trilling – quiet all the same, but new. It's all so delicate.

'This is beautiful,' says Nyssa, her voice soft as iced coffee. 'Does

this happen everywhere on your planet?'

'Not quite this way, no,' Tegan says immediately. 'I suppose you just get used to each one, wherever you are. It's comforting, isn't it?'

'It feels like the whole place has suddenly woken up.' Nyssa sounds like a born-again Christian, Tegan thinks to herself. 'Even though we haven't seen it sleeping.' What's it like to see spring on an alien planet, wonders Tegan. How does spring happen where Nyssa was born, or Adric, or the Doctor? 'I suppose it must happen systematically. The flow of various gases, killing and invigorating various plants which do the same in turn, a big cycle. And the animals on the outside, or the inside, turning in a smaller circle. Or is it a broader one?'

Tegan bites her lip. Nyssa sure knows how to rationalise the wonder out of something. 'I don't know,' she says. This seems to amuse Nyssa.

'Oh, but surely –' she begins, but tails off, even before she sees Tegan's look. Her lot were probably telepathic, thinks Tegan.

A song floats suddenly through the trees. A woman's voice, low but young. Sweet. The words are muffled – it's distant, quiet. 'That's a woman,' says Tegan, 'There's somebody in the wood with us.'

'Are you sure it's not just the Doctor revealing another enigmatic talent?' suggests Nyssa, with a little smile. Tegan lets out a laugh. Perhaps the girl has some promise after all. Not exactly one of the girls, but definitely one of the girls' little sisters.

'Come on,' she says, heading off into the trees. 'I'm sure it came from this way.'

'Are you sure?' asks Nyssa. 'If we stay close to the fence, we'll know where the TARDIS is if we –'

'Oh, Nyssa,' moans Tegan, slowing down. 'Don't be such a mizog.'

Nyssa looks a little pissed off by that, even if she doesn't know for certain what it means. 'I was only asking if you were sure,' she replies, stomping toward her through the mud.

Tegan laughs again. 'Yes,' she declares uncategorically. 'Come on!'

Thunder slips around the black sky like low laughter. Around Adric, the rain begins to spit sporadically. It strikes on the bare trees, percussive, whispering at him. Gradually the air becomes wetter, the ground softer.

He almost slips, but grabs a branch before he does so. The bark feels like ice.

He steadies himself and then looks back the way he came. Nothing but wet trees, smelling of wet wood. His clothes are already getting soggy, his hair wet. The flood tide is rising to lap against his eyelids. Everything is rain and rained on. He looks down at his feet. The earth is now slick, shiny mud. The grass blades that it swamps are few and far between. And white, he notices now. He bends closer to examine them.

Frosted. Winter? Thunder rolls again, and the rain seems to get harder at its command. But this doesn't make sense, of course. Certainly not in the normal way of things. Surely the Doctor can't have piloted them into the middle of another mess? Surely this isn't the way things are here?

A new smoke licks the inside of his nostrils. Smoke. Fire? A bonfire. November bonfires, he's seen them or read about them, he's sure he has. Perhaps the fire will draw the others to it, in the chill.

He strides on into the cold, the greens and yellows of his shirt growing darker as the world around it stains winter into the cloth. The forest greens spread, turning the yellows brown as the slick, chocolaty mud.

Blue.

Blue? He peers closer at the colour in the darkness. Blue. A stretch of fabric torn away. He slips a little, but unsteadily wanders a little closer. A blue dress, lying the mud. What's it doing out here, in the rain? It's not one of the girls' dresses, either. He trudges closer and leans over it. Blue. A young woman, spread out as if asleep. But one eye has been jolted open. The white beneath the blue skin's lid is blind and wet. Even her lips are blue now. She must have frozen. Did she fall asleep here, and freeze?

No – there's blood on her dress, a red-ringed hole tore in the white linen of her summer dress.

Stunned, he drops down into the mud, sinking into it, crunching into the icy green blades. The November smell is strong here, choking his head. He coughs, and looks to see if something deep inside her has caught alight: spontaneous human combustion – her heart has turned to

smoking ash, as the bullet exploded into her. Light inside, beneath the skin, lighting up her insides.

But there's a crooked cigarette beside her body, still smouldering. He wonders if he's crying now. Should he be crying? He can feel his eyes are wet, and his body has been shocked into over-active beats and shudders, and his skin is icy. Can he separate the elements? Should they be separated?

'Doctor?' he cries into the dark. He can't take his eyes from her cold, dead body. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor catches a falling leaf. It crumbles in his hand. Dead matter, all the weaker for it. Brown fragments in his warm hand. He brushes them away. The soil is crumbly now, and there are apples scattered in it, here and there. The sky is pale and bubbled, spotted with little dark shadows on the late-afternoon clouds. A cool breeze rattles the world around him.

Before him, standing among the tall, brown trees, is a Summerhouse. Its walls are buttery yellow, only a few years since it was painted. Grass, yellowed in its summer's cooking, has sprouted up and around the doorstep. There's a pigeon on the roof, moving from foot to foot. One 'coo.' Nothing more.

The Doctor takes another step toward the Summerhouse. He's almost afraid it will be move away from him as he nears it, like some startled animal. It seems steadfast enough, has lasted out the years, has seen each year through every season. It has some kind of Victorian feel to it, that suggestion that the ceiling was meant to be looked through, that feeling that the skies above it were meant to be studied. Because didn't they own the sky, near enough? Because didn't they want to go into it one day? Yes, thinks the Doctor, it looks like an observatory, with its domed glass roof.

It's spotless. I wonder what year this is, thinks the Doctor. I wonder, he thinks, if it's actually the time that the thing was built. Perhaps this is its first year. Perhaps it's barely been lived in yet. Or maybe it's the 1920's, when people were still rich if they were in the right places, and liked having rich things looking richer than ever. Or perhaps the late twentieth century, when everything began to have a cost – and even

worst, a cost that could be justified. When everything was kept as it had been, so many years in the past, and all the bills kept being met. When tours were led around the shells of the past. 'This is where people used to be happy. Does that seem a strange idea these days?'

There isn't a door. The front of the Summerhouse is open the elements, as is the back. Breezes blow through with whatever they're carrying. He steps closer, onto the steps leading to the door. Autumn scrunches and crunches beneath his feet.

There's somebody in the Summerhouse.

He walks slowly up the steps. A girl, lying very still, on the brickwork floor. Her white dress ripples in a slight breeze. Beside her, a daisy chain has been very carefully hooked together, but the whole circlet of flowers is dead and browned. A round clump of dead daisies. How long has she been here?

Gently, the Doctor reaches out and rolls the girl over. Yes, she is a girl. Not old at all. And she's smiling slightly. Her eyes are only lightly closed. She's fast, fast asleep.

The Doctor hurries back from the Summerhouse. Ghosts? There aren't ghosts. Ghosts aren't real. He feels cold. A chill wind against his back, as if there were someone standing there behind him to cast a shadow, blocking out the hot, summer sunshine.

But this isn't summer. Summer has passed, for him and for the girl. What's going on here? What's going on? He frowns. On the wind, he hears somebody calling. On the wind, he hears a young woman singing.

'There she is.' Inside the soft blossoms, within the new grass, Tegan can see a white dress' sleeve fluttering. The woman's voice is louder now, they are so close. The words are distinct.

'I went away,' she sings gently, 'but I will come back. I went away, but I can return. Though the winters freeze you, though the summers burn. I am always here. I am only far away. I can be with you in a day.'

'Do you see her?' asks Tegan.

'I can hear her,' replies Nyssa, a lot quieter. 'I can hear the song. But I can see somebody else with her,' she whispers. 'There's a man there.' She points with an outstretched arm.

'I went away,' hushes the woman, 'but I will come back. I went away, but I can return.'

'Is that Gershwin?' asks Tegan. 'That sounds like Gershwin.' She begins to delicate pick her way through the trees, through the greenery. She can't see the man that Nyssa talks about, she can just hear the song and see the woman, lying with her back against a tree. The breeze sweeps low through the wood, making deep rustlings across the ground. A bird sings nearby in sympathy with the woman. Their words cross over each other, the melodies flowing into each other, alien songs. Tegan feels someone grab her arm, and turns. It's Nyssa. She looks worried, her eyes are wide.

'Come back, Tegan,' she whispers, so quietly that Tegan wouldn't hear it if there were any other sounds nearby.

'What's the problem?' she hisses back. 'I want to know the name of that song.' But her friend is shaking her head, tugging on Tegan's arm.

'Come away,' she says. 'He's got a gun. That man has a gun.'

Tegan is turning back to look, to deny the irritating trepidation, when suddenly a report sounds so deep and loud that it shakes her heart, like the bass line at a concert. Yes – there is a man there; she can see him suddenly, as if the gun has fired him out into the air. He's big, bulky, dressed in black. Fat. And he's got a gun, a stubby little thing. The woman has disappeared.

'I see her now,' says Nyssa suddenly. 'She's covered in blood!'

A white hand flops into view. Tegan recoils suddenly. The images seem to be slipping in and out of her vision, randomly. But there's no doubting, the woman is dead. There's a single long breath, perhaps in, which is followed by nothing. The girls hurry away together, pausing when both figures are out of sight to all eyes.

'Let's go and tell the Doctor,' says Nyssa.

Tegan sighs angrily. 'I suppose so,' she says.

'He can help us deal with it. That was murder. Cold-blooded murder. He just shot her. I saw blood on the fallen blossoms.' Tegan tries to shhh her. 'I'm sorry, Tegan, I just – I saw it all, I saw all of it there.' Tegan lays a hand on her shoulder. 'And I –'

'Listen,' says Tegan. Nyssa listens. Now she hears what Tegan heard: a gentle, lilting voice, carrying happily through the trees, a young

woman's voice:

'I went away, but I can return. Though the winters freeze you, though the summers burn...'

Nyssa shakes her head, slowly, deliberately definitely. 'No.' she mouths, though no sound comes. 'No, it's not possible. Tegan, it's not.'

Tegan grits her teeth. 'It must be,' she says. 'If it's happening, and we both hear it. We both hear the same thing, don't we?'

'The song.' They both nod. 'Oh, but Tegan –'

'Now, steel yourself up, Nyssa. It's nothing to be afraid of. It's only the unknown. And barely that, when you think of all the books and movies and documentaries there are about it.' She looks back to where the young woman and the older man were standing. 'Why, my mother saw her own dead grandmother, sewing at the foot of her bed once. And she was happy enough to confront that ghost then.' She turns and heads back into the bushes, aware that Nyssa is following her.

The closer they get to the people, the more distinct they become. The closer they get to the people, the more of what they saw begins to happen again. But even as the gun sounds, and the woman jerks and the blood runs, they march on closer. The song spirals around them again, and the echo of the gun begins to rebound on them, but they get closer and closer and closer...

Until...

Until the couple just melt away into sunlight on the ground. Distantly they hear thunder. Tegan looks down at the ground around them. There's blood on the leaves, and gunpowder shadows. And footprints. 'They must have been ghosts,' she says. 'And ghosts can't hurt you.'

'Something even stranger, though, Tegan,' says her friend. She seems a lot steadier all of a sudden. Tegan looks at where she's pointing. A kind of a big egg shape. They both hunch down next to it and peer inside. Tegan sees a lot of fractured mechanics, a lot of broken shadows, automata deceased. There's a little blood still left on the inside of the shell.

'It was a bomb,' she says suddenly.

'Yes,' says Nyssa, 'that's what I thought. But what kind?'

'I've never seen anything that looked exactly like it,' Tegan replies. 'I must say, though, I'm not much of an authority on this kind of thing. It

leaves me cold, war. I've never had an interest.'

'But it doesn't look like it was a weapon,' says Nyssa.

'No?'

Nyssa leans in closer. 'Some kind of strange effect must have resulted from it, but no explosion.' She looks around. 'I mean, these plants and trees haven't been disturbed for centuries. What did it do when it detonated?' She looks up. 'I'm afraid, we'll have to get the Doctor's advice.'

'Oh, I don't mind,' Tegan says, with a little smile. 'I know the Doctor's some kind of alien boffin. I just don't like the idea of him thinking we're a couple of scared cats, that's all.' She puts her hands underneath the bomb's casing and tries to lift it. 'Oh,' she says, 'it's very light. Like paper.' She raises an eyebrow. 'Probably not human then. Unfortunately.'

'Oh well,' says Nyssa, with a little smile. 'That just makes it more interesting. Doesn't it?'

'Doctor!' yells Adric, stomping out of the woods. 'I'm so glad to see you!'

The Doctor looks him up and down, not critically, but in some bemusement. 'You fall in a lake, Adric?'

The boy frowns, looks down at himself and then up at the Doctor's searching look. 'No,' he says, 'I got caught in the storm. Didn't you?'

'Obviously not.' He bends and scoops up a little earth, rubbing it between his fingers. 'And this stuff's dry as a bone. It can't have rained here for months. Not even a bit of a summer shower.' He throws the soil to the ground. As it passes through the sunlight, it throws tiny shadows across the ground, shadows which bounce up toward the point of impact and lie beneath the tiny, arid fragments. 'Or an autumnal one, come to think of it. You know, something very odd –'

'I've found someone,' splutters Adric. He gestures back into the trees. 'A girl. She was dead.' His eyes are wide. His skin is pale. The Doctor doesn't remember seeing Adric so upset before. He's sure somewhere in the Alzarian's head there's a little voice tying to rationalise it all, sort it into codes and lists, but outwardly the boy's just letting out a load of emotion. 'She'd been murdered.'

'Murdered?'

'Come and see.' Adric hurries off. The Doctor hesitates only briefly before following, but Adric still calls to him to hurry up, and he does so. Adric seems very confused. Something's wrong here, too. It's autumn again. Leaves scrunch under their feet. Uric stops to pick one up. 'She was near here,' he says obscurely. 'I'm sure of it. But it wasn't like this. Only a few minutes ago, the ground was sodden here. And there were no leaves on the ground, on the trees, anywhere. It was like winter had come suddenly.' He looks up at the Doctor and hands him the leaf. 'What's going on?'

'Some form of localised time disturbance,' replies the Doctor. 'Explains the anomaly in the TARDIS. But, unfortunately, in itself its origins remain…' He blows a sigh, puffing out his cheeks.

'Unknown,' finishes Adric.

Snap.

And a laugh. They both turn their heads toward the sound of voices.

'When I said it was light, I didn't mean I *wanted* to carry it all the way.'

The Doctor scrabbles in his pockets again, retrieving the broken device. From an inside pocket, he retrieves his sonic screwdriver and busily begins to work on the machine's innards again. Adric looks up at him, questioningly.

'But you can hear them, this time, you can, can't you,' he says, almost angrily.

The Doctor ignores him and continues with his work.

'Just be careful that you don't drop it, or goodness knows *what* will ensue.'

'Doctor?' Adric points into the woods. 'You can't just deny it.'

The Doctor prods the screwdriver deep into the device and makes a final adjustment. Banging the unit against his thigh, he miraculously appears to have resurrected it, a gadget Lazarus, a Blue Peter Jesus. It begins to whirr again, like many people breathing deeply. And to bleep.

To bleep faster. And faster. And faster.

'Aha!' cries the Doctor, pointing the gizmo at two emerging figures.

'It's you!'

'Of course it is. Who did you expect?'

Adric frowns, and then smiles, then frowns again. Somehow, his brain decides to give him a smile again, a big cheesy grin of complete and utter confusion. 'Nyssa! Tegan!'

'Hello there,' says Nyssa. 'We've been looking for you for simply ages. Look what we've found.' She points to an egg-shaped object in Tegan's arms. The device in the Doctor's hands goes utterly crazy as he moves it closer and closer to the machine. Tegan seems ready to report a sob story about aching arms and back strain, but the Doctor nods violently enough to deter her.

'This is very interesting,' he says. 'Some kind of time manipulator. But very crude, of course. It seems to have, ah, exploded.' He raises his chin and looks suspiciously at the two young women. 'Not your doing, I would hope?'

'Allow us a little more respect,' says Nyssa.

'We didn't let the thing off,' replies Tegan brashly. 'We just found it, near a couple of very dangerous-looking ghosts.'

The Doctor and Adric exchange solemn glances.

'Ghosts?' they chorus.

'There was a woman,' says Nyssa. 'In white.'

'And a fat man,' says Tegan. 'He was in black. He had a gum'

'He shot her,' Adric leaps in suddenly. 'I've seen her. But I've seen her dead.'

The Doctor relieves Tegan of the machine and sets it down at their feet. 'Well,' he says, 'I'm sorry to say this time bomb's disruption to the area will continue for a long time yet. The man who planted it obviously made a terrible job of it. I can't imagine him wanting to do this. I imagine he was caught in the blast also. Perhaps he's still swimming around in the air at the moment.'

'And the girl?'

'Yes, I've seen her,' says the Doctor. 'An innocent bystander, unfortunately.'

'And she died,' Tegan spits, 'because he was afraid of letting his stupid experiment, which *didn't even work*, get found out?'

The Doctor puts his device back in his pocket. 'Well,' he says. 'She doesn't have to.'

The girl didn't wake up when the Doctor picked her up. She didn't stir at all. But even in the deep sleep, they can see her eyelids tremble precariously, a gentle barrier to the outside world. And she's breathing. They can hear her breathing.

'Of course,' whispers the Doctor as he carries her sleeping form down the steps from the Summerhouse, 'once the time distortion has dissipated, there may be a few laws being broken around here as events try to match their ends up.'

'But we'll be gone by then,' says Tegan, 'I'm hoping.'

Everyone tuts very loudly and then goes: 'Shhhhhhhhhhh.'

She rolls her eyes and mouths an apology, and then mouths something else behind their backs.

They all feel it as they cross the boundary between affected grounds. Outside, the sun is rising. The sky is splattered with orange as the brilliant orb ascends. Shadows crawl across the ground to join them, slipping over the fence and gradually retreating into their feet. Not far from them, the people in the house are about to wake up. The young woman stirs suddenly.

'Gosh,' she says, looking up at them. 'I feel as if I've been asleep for simply ages.' She sits up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. 'Oh rot – they're bound to go on at me when I get back in. Don't suppose any of you chaps knows the date?' She still seems half asleep, and doesn't react at all to their uninformed silences. Instead, she clambers to her feet and starts wandering across the lawn toward the big house. The last thing they hear her say is something like 'Oh crumbs, I've got grass stains simply covering my knees now.'

And then she's gone. Tegan raises her eyebrows, and the Doctor mirrors the action. Adric and Nyssa allow a mutual smile. 'Time to go, then?' says the Doctor, looking briefly at his watch. The others all shrug. 'We can watch the sun come up first,' he says brightly. They go to the fence.

He can see that Nyssa still has something on her mind, and waits for her to shyly voice it. Which she does, after a time. 'Doctor?'

'Mmm?'

'What about when people go down into the woods? What if they see what *we've* seen?'

He considers it for a moment and then grins. 'Probably just blame it on ghosts,' he replies, with a shrug.

Morning arrives.

Going Home

COLIN BRAKE

Anji Kapoor was bored.

Maybe I should catch the train down to New York for the weekend, she thought to herself as she wandered across the Common, *after all it's practically breaking State Law to be bored in N.Y. N.Y. so good they named it twice etc. etc.* Boston, however, was something else. Not that it was Boston's fault; of all the cities she'd visited in America it was definitely her favourite, but she couldn't deny that she preferred visiting it to living there.

As she descended into the T-station, she decided that she was being a little unfair on her temporary home. It was a great City to live in but Anji's problem was that she was neither a tourist nor a local - she was something in between. The Investment Bank who employed her had sent her on a job-swap with some management hotshot from the bank's US base of operations. Someone called Tanya Weinstein was currently living in Anji's new Docklands apartment in London and driving her top-of-the-range Clio while in exchange Anji was living in a small apartment out in Brookline and had to travel everywhere on the T. Anji was fairly sure she was getting the raw end of the deal.

The crux of Anji's problem was that 12 months was not long enough to put down any real roots and in many ways she felt her life, her *real* life, was on hold. Although her boyfriend Dave had managed to come out twice in the first half of the year, even that relationship felt as if it was on some kind of hiatus. Anji sighed heavily and tried not to count the weeks until she'd be going home. Autumn was here now - no, she corrected herself with a grin, *fall* - and the leaves were turning golden brown and beginning to drop. Her colleagues had insisted that New England rarely looked better than at this time of year so Anji decided to try and enjoy it as best she could. Her train rumbled into the station and she boarded it, determined to fight off her feelings of ennui.

G'rugtan 508, known as Tan to his closest associates, was bored. The Altrixian had been on this planet for what felt like a million cycles and although at first he had found observing the people of Earth interesting, he was now desperate to get home.

He had known it was a mistake to buy anything from old Rorta-Blor. His parents had always warned him against investing in second-hand transporters, but the urge to travel had been overwhelming. He had been saving for eight hundred and fifty-six cycles and had managed to accumulate a total of forty five Altrixian Credits, five slightly dented Federation Dollar Coins and something his friend Cal had insisted was a child's wind-up toy but which his NetLink described as a valuable Five Kroona Piece from Mortella Four.

Whatever the real value of his collection, it had all disappeared into the deep pockets of the ancient leather coat worn by the Techno-Trader. In return, Tan had taken home something Rorta-Blor had described as a "new-perfect" early prototype of the hyperdrives currently being fitted to the Federation Fleet. Tan had enthusiastically wired the rather crude looking device into the main drive of his ancient Skimmer and headed off for adventure.

On his first jump he narrowly missed the event horizon of a black hole, on the second he nearly materialised in the path of a Class 3 asteroid. Tan had tried to rewire the safety circuits but, as he worked, pieces of the device began to fall off so he had resolved to just get home. It was, therefore, the third occasion on which he had attempted to use his second-hand hyperdrive that disaster had struck.

Rather than reappear in real time/space in orbit around Altrixa Prime, he had found himself deposited above Planet Earth in the infamous Sol System. The poor Skimmer had broken up on entry into the planet's atmosphere and Tan had been lucky to activate his Escape Pod in time. He had touched down, safely, in a country he later discovered to be called the United States of America. By the local calendar he had been here for five months and, he reckoned, that was more than enough time to exhaust the entertainment properties of the decidedly dull Tellurians.

He looked down at the small tracking instrument that was blinking and bleeping quietly in his hand. A source of Artron Energy, and close

to hand... Perhaps his chance to leave this planet had finally come.

'Oh, this is just too much - this should never happen. Never, never, never!'

Peri was getting used to this new Doctor's outbursts but this was the first time she had seen the curly-haired version with the Technicolor coat get angry with his own TARDIS; normally it was her role to bear the brunt of the Time Lord's erratic moods. She knew that keeping her mouth shut would be the safest thing to do but she couldn't help but be curious as to the nature of the problem.

As far as she could tell it had been a normal landing; the weird groaning and moaning that she now associated with the Time/Space craft's engines had climaxed with an echoing thud and had then disappeared allowing her to hear the regular low hum of electrical activity that was a constant inside the Console Room. The Doctor had checked a few readouts on the mushroom-shaped central control console, announced the gravity and air to be Earth normal and had confidently reached for the bulbous red lever that activated the external doors. It was at that point that things had gone wrong: instead of swinging wide open the doors had moved barely an inch or two - revealing a tiny crack of their latest destination - and then stopped dead. It was this failure that had prompted the Doctor's outburst.

'Is there something wrong Doc?' asked Peri, instantly regretting both the question and her use of the diminutive, an error guaranteed to annoy the Time Lord.

'Wrong?' echoed the Doctor incredulously, 'Wrong,' he repeated and then just as she was expecting a third "Wrong" dunked in an even richer syrup of sarcasm he wrong-footed her. 'Of course something is wrong. Even a slim thing like you isn't going to squeeze out of a doorway that wide.' He indicated the door with a vague wave of his hand.

'There's a fault in the mechanism. This old Type 40 reall could do with a thorough overhaul...' he muttered morosely.

'You've been saying that for months,' his long-suffering companion pointed out.

'Time is relative,' the Doctor surprised her with a sudden grin, 'come

on, let's try the manual back-up.' The Doctor opened up one of the roundels on the wall to reveal a cupboard stuffed with all manner of junk. He pulled out something that resembled a car jack.

'You're not serious?' Peri exclaimed, as he crouched down by the doors and inserted part of the jack into a socket set into the wall.

'Why ever not? Simple old-fashioned engineering. Even the Time Lords can manage that now and again.'

Peri knew better than to argue further. She watched in silence as the Doctor set about turning the crank of the jack and, in response to his actions, the doors began to open.

The Doctor got to his feet, a self-satisfied grin on his face. 'There that wasn't so hard was it?' he asked, rhetorically, 'Problem solved.'

He looked up at Peri and smiled again, but she was shaking her head sadly.

'I don't think we're going anywhere,' she suggested.

The Doctor followed her gaze. Through the now-open doors there was a new impediment to exploring whatever world lay outside the TARDIS - a wooden door, inches from the outer-plasma shell of the space/time machine. The TARDIS had clearly materialised in such a position as to make exit from the craft impossible. The Doctor sighed theatrically.

'Isn't the TARDIS meant to avoid landing in places like this?' asked Peri, remembering one of the Doctor's boasts about his machine's Al qualities.

'Yes it is indeed,' answered the Doctor in an annoyed tone, 'Like I said, it really is time I sorted the old girl out once and for all...'

Peri shrugged. 'Never mind, Doctor. Let's just close up and try somewhere else, eh?'

Now it was the Doctor's turn to shake his head. 'Can't. Not yet. The engines need time to recharge before we can dematerialise,' he explained, 'For the moment, my dear Peri, we're stuck.'

Anji rattled the door, annoyed at its refusal to budge.

She cursed herself for thinking about home earlier. Now she couldn't even get into this temporary one. Sod's law in action. She turned the key again. No, no doubt about it, the door was unlocked - so why

wouldn't it open? She put her shoulder to the door and tried again.

Anji Kapoor was nothing if not petite, so brute force was never going to be on her side but to her amazement she did manage to get the door to move just a fraction. She peered through the crack but could make out nothing of her borrowed apartment - it was as if something very large and dark was sitting just the other side of the door, blocking the doorway.

Anji wondered what it could possibly be. When she'd left the apartment this morning there had been nothing there but a humorous doormat with the words GO AWAY written on it.

She sighed, annoyed at this latest frustration, and then she remembered the fire escape. Perhaps if she could just see what the obstruction was she could do something about it. She headed back towards the stairwell.

Tan hurried along, keeping out of sight of the Tellurians as best he could. Thus far he had managed not to attract any attention. The fact that he was, relative to the natives, tiny probably helped. At a little over three inches tall he was all but invisible to most of the people thronging the streets of Boston. The only person who had seen him had been one of the local females.

He'd been using the last fuel reserves in the jet-pack that his parents had insisted he install in the skimmer's escape pod and was flying past a building labelled as some kind of Court. The thin female, dressed in an extremely short skirt, had been coming down the steps from the building and her eyes had widened in surprise as she saw the tiny humanoid figure in what looked like a toy-jet-pack flying in front of her nose. She closed her eyes, unable to believe what she was seeing and at that moment the jet-pack stalled and Tan had made an unexpected emergency landing. When the thin girl opened her eyes again he was nowhere to be seen. She turned to the well-dressed man following her down the steps.

'John, I think I just saw a fairy fly past my nose. Did you see anything?' she asked, excitedly.

The man started to stammer, then gave up and answered with an involuntary nose-whistle.

The thin girl shook her head. 'Never mind.'

From the steps Tan looked up and saw the girl shake her head in disbelief. Moving quickly to avoid her descending foot, Tan scrambled to the next step, and continued his journey. According to the power scanner, the energy source he was seeking was close - and building up. If he was going to hitch a ride he had to hurry.

Inside the TARDIS, Peri watched as the Doctor ambled around his console consulting readouts and nodding.

'Nearly there.' he commented.

'Great,' replied Peri in an annoyed tone. The Doctor had done some further checks as to their whereabouts and had told her that they were in late twentieth century Earth. It was the closest Peri had been to home for ages and she couldn't get out to look around because of a stupid door. She was more than slightly aggrieved. The Doctor hadn't noticed. He'd just produced a toolbox from somewhere and yanked off a panel from the base of the central console. For the next ten minutes Peri had to talk to his legs while he inserted his upper body into the depths of the TARDIS' console, trying to fix the door controls. Finally he slid himself back into view and looked up at Peri with a grin of triumph.

'I think we can at least close the door now,' he announced. Somehow he got to his feet with an agility that seemed out of sync with his slightly overweight figure and reached out to grasp the bright red door control. Peri braced herself for a torrent of angry words but to her surprise the doors began to close.

Neither the Doctor nor his companion saw the tiny out-of-breath figure hurling himself through the closing gap.

Anji climbed the metal fire escape still puzzling over what could possibly be blocking her door. It just didn't make sense. And Anji hated things that didn't have logical explanations. It was a constant cause of arguments between her and Dave. Her boyfriend was willing to believe in anything from ley-lines to alien abductions whereas Anji, according to Dave, wouldn't believe it was raining until she got wet.

As she climbed the stairs she heard a strange noise that seemed to be coming from her room but before she could try to work out what the

bizarre trumpeting was it had gone.

She reached the window and peered in. And gasped in amazement. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in front of her door. There was no way she could have failed to open it. If there had been an impediment it had gone - which was impossible. Anji blinked but the facts remained the same. She must have been having some kind of weird delusion. Anji made a mental note not to mention this to Dave. He'd be bound to put it down as some kind of alien encounter. And one thing Anji was certain of, the one thing you don't run into in the streets of Boston are aliens from another planet.

Peri thought the alien looked cute. The fact that he was three inches high and resembled an elf probably helped. The Doctor, however, had a stern expression on his face. He regarded the alien, standing on his palm, and shook his head.

'We Time Lords don't take kindly to stowaways,' he intoned gravely.

Tan shrugged. 'I'm sorry. But what choice did I have. I could hardly hitchhike off the planet could I?

The Doctor's face broke into a grin. 'No, I suppose not... Okay Tan, let's try and get you home shall we?'

'How long will it take?' asked the tiny Altrixian casually.

'Put it this way,' answered Peri with a knowing look, 'Don't hold your breath.'

As Anji walked through the doorway she experienced a most unusual sensation, a strange kind of shiver, which passed through her entire body. It was almost as if she'd walked through some kind of energy field.

For a moment Anji had the sensation of being somewhere else, somewhere strange and alien but somehow familiar. She had a fleeting glimpse of a country house kitchen but with some kind of science-fiction control room nearby. And then as quickly as it had come the vision went and Anji was back in her borrowed apartment, surrounded by normality.

Anji blinked, not quite sure what she had just experienced. It felt like a kind of *déjà vu*; but in reverse; a glimpse of some kind of future

perhaps?

She shook her head and went to put the kettle on. But half way to the kitchen she stopped and decided to wait a while for a hot drink.

Perhaps the girls in Data Input were right - maybe she was drinking too much coffee.

Eye of the Beholder

TOM & ALRYSSA KELLY

I still couldn't sleep. Not soundly, anyway.

It was ridiculous, really, I thought as I slipped off the nightshirt and climbed back into my clothes. After sliding on my black shoes and brown velvet frock coat, I strode out of my bedroom and headed towards the console room, *I was sleeping five to six hours a day in a prison on Ha 'olam,* I thought distractedly. *But now that I'm back in my own TARDIS and my own bed, it's all I can do to shut my eyes.*

Momentarily, my thoughts turned outwards to check the TARDIS as I stepped onto the raised dais where the console resided. Running long, thin fingers over the warm polished wood and cool burnished brass, I realised how much I had missed the old girl. I had, after all, been away for more than three years. But now I was back.

Great lot of good that does me, I thought, as I finished checking the readings, then made my way thoughtfully to my comfy Victorian reading chair. *Well, at least the nightmares and the sleepwalking are allowing me to catch up on my reading,* I thought ruefully as I sat down and picked up a book from the arm of the chair.

Truth be told, it was rather disconcerting to find myself in a completely different part of the TARDIS with no clue as to how or why. And I had managed more than once to wake myself with loud, terrified shouting. Sam was attending yet another rally; although this time more at my own insistence than hers. My behaviour was disturbing myself enough as it was; who knew what Sam was making of it? Either way, I needed a little time alone to collect myself.

I distractedly pushed a shaky hand through my tousled hair and drew a ragged breath. So, I decided after a moment, *that means I stay awake no matter how tired I become. Well, at least for now,* I amended. Perhaps, eventually, my sleep might become less troubled.

It was when I had re-read the same paragraph for the sixth time that I realised there was no sense in trying to read either, so I gently set the book on the table near my chair. Bending forward, I reached a long arm under the chair. After a moment, my fingers found what they were searching for, and I sat back abruptly, a large sketchpad in my hand. Then I reached towards the table and retrieved a pencil from just in front of the Tiffany lamp.

Slowly, cautiously, I flipped back the cover page and began drawing rather hesitant lines. Then I erased what I had drawn, and started again. I scowled at the sheet of paper, erased my work, and started once more. The more I tried drawing, the darker and more frustrated I felt, until finally I flung both sketchpad and pencil across the room, seething with rage.

Had they taken everything? Had they left me with nothing at all? My eyes widened with fear and fury as I remembered what they had done to me. They had taken my freedom, my clothes, and very nearly my left eye. They had stripped me of my privacy, my rights, and much of my confidence. I felt utterly violated. Every so often I still flinched away from people reflexively, as if I was about to be struck. Burying my face in my hands, I realised that they had taken my abilities, my liberty, and quite possibly my sanity. Was I truly mad?

The worst part of the ordeal had been the inability to fight against anything. The implant had made my body as much of a prison as the complex itself, and had reduced me to a tempestuous child scrawling broad, unidentifiable pictures in crayon - crayons that I then had hurled across the room in anger, much as I had done just now. Should I just surrender and let the waves of madness swamp me, drag me under silently?

'No!' The ferocity of my answer surprised me, and yet it shouldn't have done. I was mentally and physically exhausted and my self-esteem had undergone a savage beating. I knew I should be asleep, but that terrified me even more than staying awake. Besides, it would take more than a good night's sleep to heal this damage. I needed a *real* rest, with time to relax and reflect... I needed a break, a bit of a holiday. But where to go? *Somewhere warm and sunny - but not like*

Ha 'olam, I thought. *Somewhere with trees and growing things, with lots of people. and lots of things to see and do....* The gleam in my eyes fought with grim determination as I decided where I wanted to go and what I needed to do to keep my sanity intact

I smiled and spun around, practically diving towards the console, frantically resetting the coordinates, then dematerialising with a grand series of flourishes. *I'll show them*, I decided defiantly as the TARDIS sped towards its destination. I'd only been free of them for a handful of days, but that taste of liberty was enough to help me decide. I'd not only regain what I had lost, I'd do my best to better it. And I knew exactly how I'd do it

'Florence might be rather interesting at this time of year. I think,' I smiled as I re-checked the destination indicator. Italy in 1507 was not the safest place to be, but after Ha'olam...

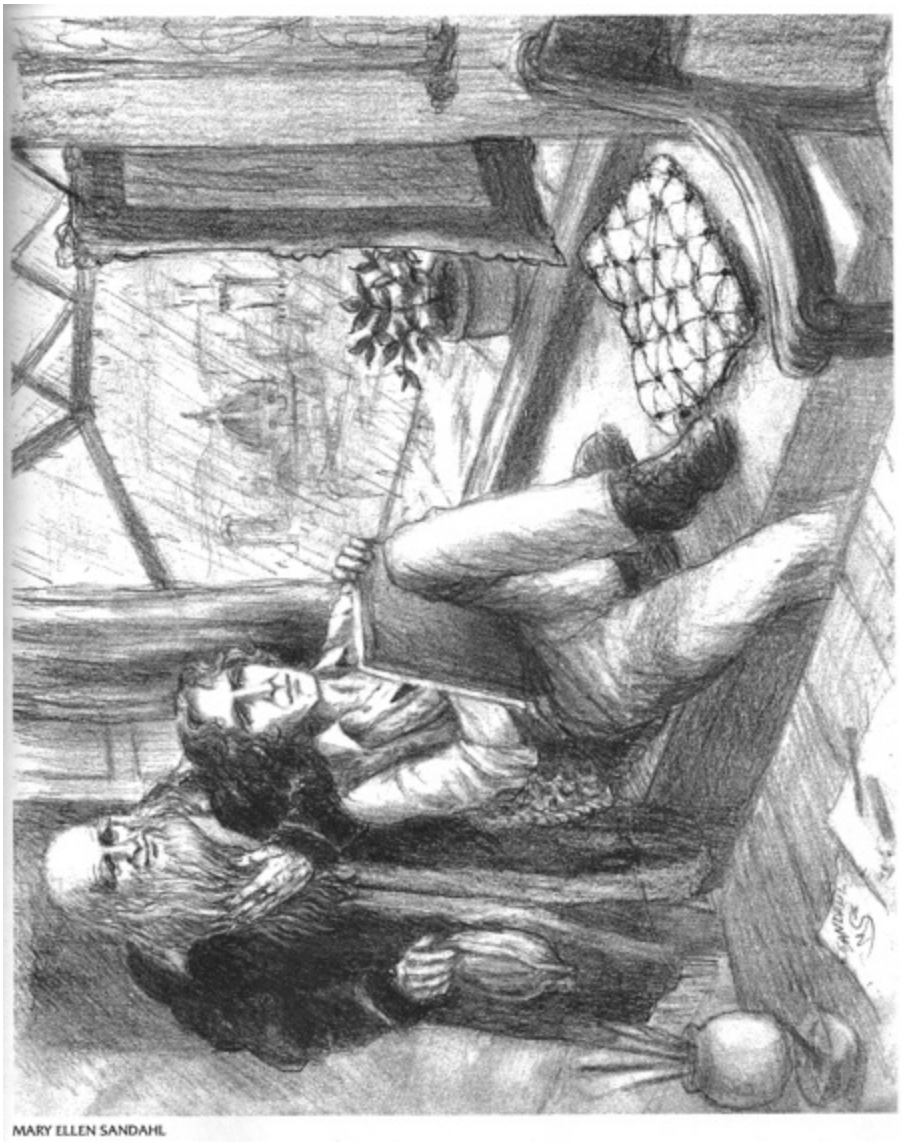
'A quick look around, and a visit with an old friend or two...' I heard my voice ringing in my ears, and then fading off uncertainly. Though I felt somewhat better than when I left OBFSC, I still had attacks of insecurity occasionally. In the past I had recovered from physical wounds that could have been permanently disabling, possibly fatal. But the wounds I suffered now were mental, emotional. Would they ever heal?

The indicator showed that the TARDIS had reached her destination, and pushed the doubts that haunted me to the back of my mind. I strode out of the door into the bright sunlight, shading. my eyes against it. I strolled along contentedly, enjoying the relatively fresh air, and the warm Mediterranean sun. Breathing in the aroma of orange blossoms, I sighed contentedly. It was good to be free, and able to enjoy that freedom. Now, I had something to push against, to fight against, a glimmering of a cause. And if Leonardo could lend a hand...

However, I did not have the chance to test those barriers until much later. It was in the waning hours of the afternoon that I finally had an opportunity to visit Leonardo. My memory played me false for a while, and I spent a good while in the market square, sampling juicy oranges and admiring the exquisite pottery and glassware created by the local craftsmen, while I tried to remember where Leonardo lived. As it was, I

ended up asking directions from one of the white-haired women in charge of the fish-stall. After a few suspicious glances, she told me which way to go. I walked quickly, purpose evident in my stride. After a few wrong turns, I came upon Leonardo's home, and knocked hesitantly on the door. Would the great Leonardo have time for me? Would he even recognise me? After all, I had changed yet again!

I needn't have worried. After a few brief seconds, the artist clapped a bony hand on my shoulder and welcomed me back. I allowed him a moment, then got to the point.



'Leonardo, do you remember when you were trying to teach me

how to draw?'

'Yes. Yes, I do,' the old man chuckled, smoothing his own long white beard. 'You had some talent, but you were far too impatient. You thought that because you could draw those little caricatures, you should be able to draw everything else, training or no training...'

'I was rather a pain in the backside then,' I admitted sheepishly. 'But I've grown out of that now, hopefully. I have come to ask a large favour of you....'

'You would like me to try again?' Leonardo asked bemusedly. I nodded slowly. Leonardo looked me up and down, carefully studying me with the gaze of a true artist. 'Hmm... slight frame. Long legs... long, flowing golden-brown locks, with just a touch of red...' he murmured, circling me to inspect me more closely.

'Mediterranean summer sky-blue eyes... I think I may have mixed that colour once...' he teased. Examining (and unnerving) me further, he mused, 'Aahh... Fine, strong facial bone structure... long, fine fingers like those of an artisan.' His faced creased into a grin. 'Even your clothes have changed again. The velvet and brocade suit you, especially the long flowing lines of the dark brown coat. But there is something else that has made you different. What is it?'

'Regeneration?' I offered, not certain what he was trying to express.

With a start, Leonardo realised exactly what it was. 'You have an air of humility. Yes, there is some of that arrogance that seems to follow you from life to life, but...'

He paused, somehow knowing how vulnerable I felt right now, somehow understanding without me saying a word. 'Something has definitely changed you, more than physically.' The compassion in his eyes held me, strengthened me. With an exaggerated sigh, he relented. 'I suppose I can take on another student, since my usual apprentice is presently on holiday, or so it seems -' I brightened considerably at this, '- but only on two conditions.'

'Which are?' I hopped from foot to foot with barely-contained excitement.

'First of all, you will *listen* to my instructions this time... Leonardo began, pointing his skeletal index finger, fully expecting vociferous

protests. Instead, he received a relatively meek nod from me, and a reply of, 'To the best of my ability.' There was probably still a hint of defiance in my eyes, but I think Leonardo would have been disappointed otherwise.

'And the second?' I prompted.

'That you sit for me for a painting, or at least a sketch,' the artist answered, trying to gauge my reaction.

'Me? You want me to sit for you?' It was my turn to be astonished. I mulled it over for a moment or two, then answered slowly, 'If you like... it doesn't *seem* to contravene any Laws of Time...'

'That's settled, then? Good... the first thing you'll need to do is get a few materials together.' With this, he led me to the studio area and helped me assemble the required supplies. I knew Leonardo was dismayed by how much my drawing skill had deteriorated, but he hid it well and taught with gentle patience. We started at the very beginning, with lines and shapes.

Over the next few weeks, with patience and diligent practice, I worked my way through still life, shading, and the importance of light and dark. I learned and re-learned detail and texture, proportion and perspective, and tried all the different media - although I seemed to work best in pencil, ink, chalk or charcoal. I drew buildings, sunsets, animals and furniture, but none of them seemed quite right. I even (somewhat grudgingly) learned to draw the underlying musculature of people, although I complained that I knew that well enough already, unfortunately.

It was on my sixty-third day of freedom, after Leonardo had concluded that day's lesson and told me to go and practice, that I knew I had made some progress. I supposed that one day, probably when my days of liberty outnumbered those of my captivity, I'd stop counting them; but for now, it was a fine, sunny day; warm enough to be comfortable, but not too warm. Leaving my frock coat, waistcoat, and cravat inside (I had learned early on in my lessons to remove them before drawing or sketching), I grabbed my drawing tools and headed outside.

Nestling myself in a quiet corner, I glanced about, looking for something or someone to draw. I tried sketching a horse from the back view, but somehow it didn't look quite right. Probably the angle, I mused. Then a young lady walked into view and seated herself on a bench. She was tatting lace, but from time to time she would look up, to watch the birds, smell the blossoms, warm her face. She was there an hour or more, which gave me plenty of time to render what I considered a passable sketch, although there was still something off. The young woman left after a while, but I continued to work on the piece from memory, ignoring the warmth on my cheekbones, finishing some time later. Then I took it inside to Leonardo and hesitantly proffered my sketchbook to him.

'Hmm. What's this?' Leonardo wondered for a moment, and then properly switched from artist to art teacher/critic. 'Hmm... '

He considered the drawing from every angle, as I grew more and more anxious. 'The perspective looks good... the proportions are almost correct... good detail to the hair and face... you could be a bit more definite with the light and shadow, but that might destroy the softness of the piece...'

I was puzzled for a moment, then smiled. Leonardo was paying me a compliment! My surprise turned to shock when he told me, 'Yes, that's a good start, very good. Adjust the proportions slightly and it will be remarkable.'

Again, it was right, but not right... I wanted to tear the tablet in half. To come so close and to still not get it right! I vowed to work until it was right. No, I vowed to work on it until it was *perfect*. I was so intent on castigating myself that I did not trust my ears when I thought I heard Leonardo murmur something like 'I'd like to see more like that...' Instead, I ran out of the house, prowling the streets of Florence for hours until I calmed down and could deal with working on the drawing again.

A few days later, I was still trying to fix the drawing. Finally, I put it aside in disgust, since I still hadn't managed to correct the faults. Leonardo had not yet returned and I grew restless. The afternoon lesson was late and the rain, which had been a light drizzle before, was

now a downpour. I waited for it to let up a bit, but the storm continued unabated.

I started pacing about, coat tails swinging behind me. If I didn't think about the deluge outside, perhaps I wouldn't feel so very trapped. To take my mind off of it, I started flipping through Leonardo's sketchbook, easily reading the mirror writing. Then, on a whim, I grabbed a sketchpad and began to draw a self-portrait using the mirror that hung on the wall.

Some time later, a rather bedraggled Leonardo made his way to my side to observe my technique, and nod occasionally. But I was immersed in the moment, and barely saw him. After a while, I completely forgot he was there. Finally, I finished and set the sketchpad down with a grateful sigh. It was when I was trying to ease some of the kinks out of my strained muscles that I remembered Leonardo, and apologised profusely.

'No, don't apologise, my boy. Here, let me see what you have done.'

After examining it carefully, Leonardo came to a decision. 'It is very good, Doctor, very good indeed... and that is why I believe it is time for you to go.'

'Go? Why? Have I displeased you in some way? What have I done wrong?' I asked, hurt.

Leonardo chuckled. I frowned, puzzled.

'You've done nothing *wrong*, Doctor. In fact, you've done so well that I am *insisting* that you leave.'

I was still confused. He explained, 'Now you need to learn from others, and try things on your own... mind you, I'll expect you to come back and sit for me. That, and we'll need to work a bit more on your painting technique.' A wicked gleam was shining in the old man's eyes as he said, 'And if you are difficult again, I may send you to Michelangelo to study sculpture.'

I was well aware of the younger artist's legendary temper and flinched reflexively, then realised it was a joke.

'Oh no, Leo, anything but *that*,' I wailed, trying to keep a straight face. I failed miserably.

Leonardo laughed as he handed me a heavy cloak.

'This should keep you dry until you reach your craft, my friend.'

'Thank you, Leo, for everything. You don't know how much you have helped me.'

I suspect the sincere appreciation in my eyes touched the old man's heart, for he hugged me tightly as I bade him farewell. I returned his hug, thanked him again, then gathered up my supplies, slipped on the cloak, and headed for the TARDIS with light hearts.

As I approached my time ship, I drew the key from my pocket and prepared to unlock the door. I would finally be moving on again now, although I felt that perhaps I could use a holiday after this one! I felt a smile spreading slowly across my face as I realised I had done what I promised myself, and more... There was still more healing needed, but this was a definite start. And I had even managed to get the proportions right.

'Yes! I did it!' I shouted as I pushed the doors open and moved confidently to the console, securing the doors and setting the next destination, a new spring in my step and joy in my soul.

After getting the TARDIS on her merry way, I flopped into my comfy reading chair, and then reached beneath me to remove something. Getting a good look at it, I realised that it was the teddy bear I'd picked up for Sam on Ha'olam, and adopted as my own. Grinning, I set it beside me, and retrieved my sketchpad and pencil and began to draw, working on the woman in the courtyard tatting lace, with much better results than last time. I managed to correct the proportions and enhance some of the shading and details before the strain of the past few months caught up with me. I had one last glance at the drawing before it slipped silently from my hands and I drifted, for the first time in a long time, into a deep dreamless sleep. I saw the face of the Florentine woman smiling at me, and I could not help but smile in return.

In vino veritas

Mark Michalowski

'Have you never wondered, Chesterton,' said the Doctor, leaning forward with an intensity in his eyes a that Ian hadn't seen before, 'why I never talk about my past? Why I haven't explained why Susan and I had to leave our planet? Have you never wondered what it was called, and what we were doing in that scrapyard in Totter's Lane?'

Ian gave a burp and unsteadily put his half-empty glass down on the table. He shrugged. When the Doctor had set the Ship down in Edwardian London and had suggested that the two of them go for a quiet drink in a local hostelry, he hadn't expected that it was so the Doctor could have an intimate chat with him. Two hours (and, Ian realised blurrily, innumerable pints of strong beer) ago, the Doctor had seemed to want to do little but chat about history. But in the last few minutes, his tone had changed.

'I suppose I thought it was all too painful, Doctor. I mean, of course Barbara and I have wondered about it all; Barbara once nearly asked you what your planet was called but -'

'Gallifrey,' said the Doctor sharply. 'It's called Gallifrey.' And with a strangely satisfied sigh, he sat back in his seat.

'Oh,' said Ian, feeling vaguely disappointed. It sounded like somewhere in Ireland. He looked at the Doctor, who was beaming broadly, his eyes twinkling. He reached out and patted Ian's hand.

'My dear boy, you have no idea how good it is to be able to say that name - despite,' he chuckled grimly, 'the circumstances of our leaving.' He took a deep breath, stretching his shoulders back in a gesture of intense relief. 'Would you mind if I said a few words?'

Ian waved his hands, vaguely, generously. The beer was starting to get to him. The Doctor coughed into his hand, like someone embarking on a long and important speech.

'Quantum wave functions, semi-autonomous AI, harmonic string resonances, virtual reality. Hand of Omega, Rassilon, nanites,

regeneration... *Time Lords!*'

He sat back again, a smug - almost drugged - look on his face, as though getting that string of gibberish out had been the ultimate in catharsis for him. Ian didn't know what to say. He didn't have a clue what the Doctor was on about.

'The reason I've never told you about Gallifrey, Chesterton - about the Time Lords, Rassilon - all that - is that I *can't*.'

'Can't?'

The Doctor gestured at his body.

'My body is swarming with nanites, Chesterton -' he held up his hand to forestall Ian's next question '- microscopic living machines which constantly monitor and control my body. They'll play an important part in my first regeneration. You are listening, aren't you?'

Ian's head was dropping towards his chest, but at the sound of his name, he brought it up sharply and nodded, over-eagerly in the way that drunken people do.

'Yeah, yeah, regeneration,' he slurred.

The Doctor arched an eyebrow.

'Well, when this body starts wearing out - which, I would hasten to guess, won't be far off - the nanites will help me to regenerate it, giving me a new appearance and, I fear, a rather changed personality.' He tutted impatiently. 'But I'm getting off the track. The reason I've never mentioned any of this is because there is a defect in those nanites. The micromodifiers in my bloodstream, remember?'

Ian nodded, firmly. 'Nannies,' he said confidently, reaching for his glass (and missing it by several inches).

'Normally, Time Lords - my people - are able to metabolise alcohol away instantly when we choose. And if we *don't* choose to do so, it has a similar effect on us as it does you humans. But there's something wrong with my nanites. In the absence of alcohol, they seem to be having a numbing effect on my memory. I have problems, you may have noticed, even remembering the names of my companions... *Chessington*.' The Doctor winked. 'But I've only recently discovered that a certain quantity of alcohol can temporarily disable them, giving me full - if temporary - access to my memories.'

'Chessington,' said Ian, with just a hint of a giggle. He downed the last of his beer and waved the glass hopefully at the Doctor.

'Not for me, thank you - and, I think, probably not for you. Whatever will Barbara and Susan think when they find that I've allowed you to get into this state?'

'She'll be fluming,' said Ian, breaking up into giggles again. 'Sorry, fuming. Fluming. Fuming -'

'Yes, yes my dear boy. Very amusing. But I brought you here to get *me* drunk, not you.'

The Doctor folded his arms, and watched Ian stare blankly and unfocusedly at him.

'I come from a world more advanced than you can imagine, Chesterton. I've travelled in time and space, visiting worlds populated by beings made of gas and stone. I've witnessed wars with weapons that even *I* couldn't describe. And yet my travelling companions have never thought it odd that I only seem to talk about things in terms of "computers" and "robots" and "ray guns". Apart from Susan, that is - and I'm sure she thinks I'm going prematurely senile.' The Doctor glanced around the smoky, bustling pub as if, for the first time, he feared being overheard. 'Of course I'm much more than a Time Lord you know,' he said, more quietly this time. 'I'm half human on my mother's side and I've been born twice - once naturally, once by Gallifreyan loom. I left home during a civil war when I was Lord President, with Susan, the granddaughter of my original self, one of the founders of ancient Gallifrey, and a legendary weapon which I hope to use to destroy the Daleks at some point - that's what we were doing in Totter's Lane, by the way, Chesterton. If I'd had my hip-flask on me when we'd run into them on Skaro I'd have remembered that, you know. As it was I didn't even remember that I even knew about them.' He tutted self-deprecatingly and shook his head gently at Ian. 'And apart from

protecting Earth - a planet my people are intimately linked to, you may be surprised to learn - and fighting the Gods of Ragnarok, opposing the Daleks is one of my on-going secret missions for the Celestial Intervention Authority who aided my escape. What do you say to that my boy?'

Ian smiled brightly.

'These pork scratchings are fantastic! They're so much better than the ones in packets.'

'You haven't understood a word I've been saying have you?'

'Of course I have, Doctor. You were telling me about these pork scratchings.'

Ian giggled again and stuffed another piece in his mouth.

'Come along, young man - I think it's about time we got you back to the TARDIS. The others will wonder what's happened to us.'

He manoeuvred the chuckling Ian out of his seat and out of the pub, waving a cheery farewell to the barman. As the cold, foggy air hit them, Ian gave a cough - and turned to the gutter to throw up. The Doctor stood and watched, tutting avuncularly. The sound of running footsteps on the wet cobbles cut into the sound of Ian's retching.

'Barbara! Susan!' the Doctor greeted them. 'How splendid to see you - but you really shouldn't have come to find us. We're fine, honestly. Well...' He shook his head at Ian, standing up and dabbing his mouth with the handkerchief that Barbara had produced from her coat pocket.

'Doctor!' she rounded on him. 'What were you thinking of? He's drunk!'

Susan looked up at the Doctor, her mouth pursed into a knowing smile.

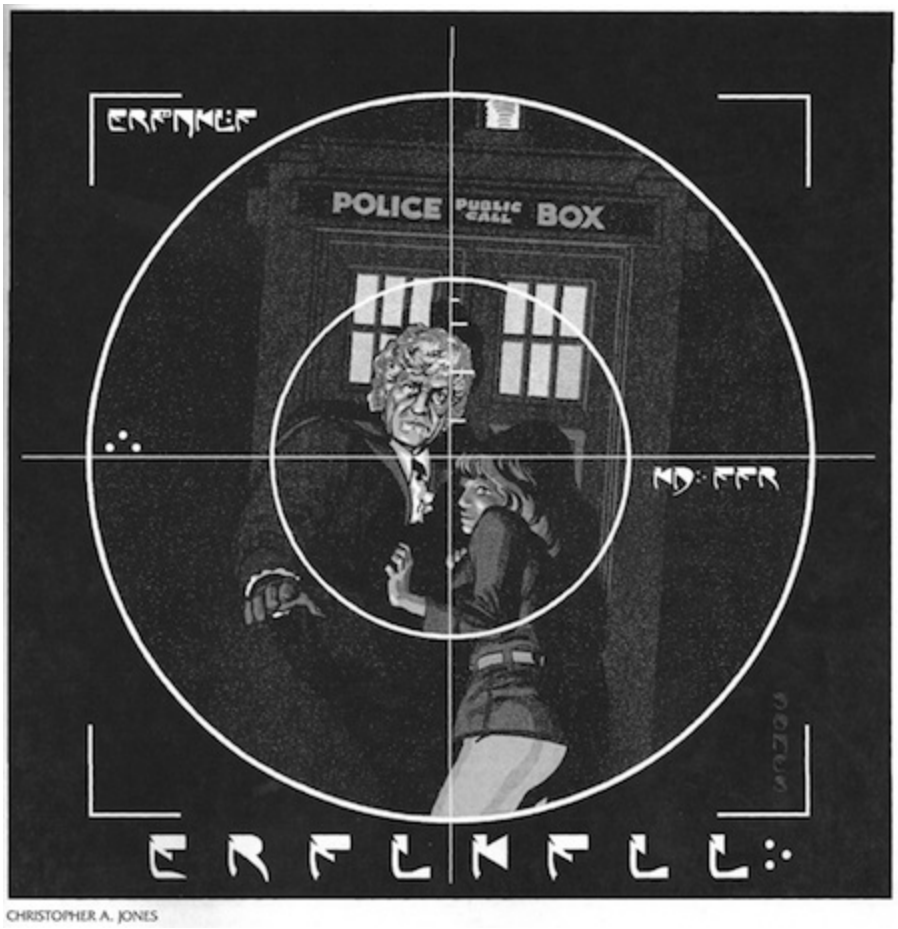
'So what were you two talking about, Grandfather?' she asked, linking her arm into his.

'Oh, this and that, my dear.'

'The Doctor was telling me about his past,' said Ian unsteadily, and Susan caught the Doctor's worried look.

'Really?' asked Barbara. 'Well that'll be a first.' She threw a sharp look back at the Doctor as she helped Ian, groggily, along the pavement.

'Nannies,' said Ian confidently. 'He was telling me about his nannies.'
The Doctor winked at Susan, unseen by Ian or Barbara.
'Of course I was, Chesterfield,' he said. 'Of course I was.'



CHRISTOPHER A. JONES

Walk A Mile In My Shoes

Julian Eales

'How's your meal, Doctor?' The Brigadier barked across the table. The Doctor had a fork full of mashed potato, lovingly prepared by UNIT's kitchen staff, and a faraway expression on his face. Hearing his name, he brought his attention back to Earth, and examined the cooling food before him. He inclined the fork, and the potato fell heavily to his plate.

'Not bad,' he commented, 'if you enjoy prison food.' The Doctor put down his fork and pushed away the plate, signalling the end of the meal.

'Steady on, old man!' Lethbridge-Stewart bristled at his words, 'It may not be haute cuisine, but Cookie does his best.'

'If you're not hungry Doc, I'll have your sausages.' Benton attempted to lighten the atmosphere, employing his trademark bumbling charm.

'Help yourself. I'm not very hungry today.' The Doctor's joi de vivre had evaporated in recent days, sparked by his discovery that his captors, the Time Lords, had manipulated him, once again. He had managed to construct a new dematerialisation circuit for his ship, and convinced himself that he had escaped his exile, only to find himself doing their bidding again. Once he and Jo returned to Earth, he felt the knowledge of time travel slipping away from him once more.

Lethbridge-Stewart had instigated the practice of formal dinners with his key staff as an exercise in team building. It was not quite how the rules of comportment would recommend, but the Brigadier was not nearly so hidebound as the Doctor liked to suggest. When you are charged with the solemn duty of protecting your world from the incursion of extra-terrestrial invaders on a weekly basis, your perceptions cannot remain unyielding. There is a time and place for rulebooks, and a time for more flexible thought. In the time since he had first encountered the Doctor, and with the formation of UNIT, Lethbridge-Stewart increasingly found that he could encompass his life with a single line from the Bard. 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy.'

Sometimes he wondered whether it had always been like this, or if the Doctor's very presence was drawing them to him inexorably, like moths to a candle. It was one of those imponderables, best left alone, in his considered opinion. He was just grateful that the Doctor was on their side, since the only other example of his people that the Brigadier had encountered was the Master, a perpetual thorn in UNIT's side, currently at liberty, and planning who knew what. That must be especially galling to the Doctor right now, that his nemesis was free to come and go as he pleased, while he remained chained to the rock. Prometheus-like.

'Doctor?' Captain Mike Yates spoke up, breaking the heavy silence. 'Am I right in thinking that your TARDIS is equipped with a machine that can produce food from all over the universe?'

'Well, yes. Yes it does, Mike. Why do you ask?'

'I was just thinking that if you're feeling homesick, you could always

whip yourself up a Martian omelette.' Jo Grant giggled at the idea. The Doctor grew a little more animated at the suggestion.

'Actually, the Ice Warriors don't eat eggs. Can't pick them up, you see... but I see what you're getting at. The problem with the TARDIS food replicator is that it makes all these dishes perfectly. Too perfectly.'

'What?' Jo blustered 'I don't understand. How can it be *too* perfect?'

'Well, Jo... Say you like a nice steak, cooked medium rare...'

'Yuck! Too red for my taste!' Jo wrinkled her nose in mock-disgust. The Doctor sighed indulgently, and continued with his example.

'For the sake of argument, say you do. And it arrives. It melts in your mouth, and is complemented by perfectly caramelised onions, with thirty-one perfect minted peas and other vegetables. A perfect meal.'

'Sounds good enough to eat.' Remarked Sergeant Benton as he munched one of the sausages he had liberated from the Doctor's plate while he carried forth.

'I'm still in the dark.' said Jo.

'That's because I haven't finished yet. You have your perfect meal, but if you decide that you'd like it again, the machine will produce exactly the same meal, down to the thirty-one perfect peas. No room for variation. The steak has no chance of ever being over-cooked, the onions never a little soggy. And of course, no room for improvement. Ever. Who wants to eat their favourite meal forever?'

'I was wondering why you chose to eat Cookie's boiled to death mash with us!' Yates replied, though he had cleared his own plate with military precision.

The Doctor sank back into his chair, his lecture over for the moment. His mind began to consider possibilities, turning over ideas, making associations, and then he had it. Something he had not thought of in many years. If he could not go to the mountain, he would make the mountain come to him. He dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin, and laid it down. His chair squeaked as he pushed back with his legs and made to stand up.

'I'll take my leave if I may, Brigadier? Thank you gentlemen, and Jo, for your good company and a meal cooked to beautiful imperfection!'

He turned to Yates and made eye contact. 'Thank you, Mike. You've given me something to puzzle on. Good night all.' With that, he turned on his heel and left the dining room leaving them to wonder what he meant.

Bright and early the following morning, Mike Yates found himself tapping at the door to the Doctor's laboratory. The wine he'd had both during and after the meal the previous night, was making its disapproval clear, with a rhythmic drumbeat behind his eyes. It reminded him why he no longer went drinking with Benton when they had a weekend pass. Through the frosted glass, he could make out the Doctor engaged in some energetic display. No doubt there was something about his alien physiology that preserved him against the ravages over overindulgence. Yates wondered if he had even been to bed after he left them. Probably not, if past behaviour was anything to go by. Once the Doctor had a bee in his bonnet about something, it was difficult to deflect him with something as negligible as a good night's sleep.

He knocked again, and received the same response. He mentally girded his loins and prepared for the inevitable confrontation. If not with the Doctor, there would surely be one with the Brigadier, who had sent him on the errand in the first instance, when the Doctor had failed to answer his telephone calls. He was between a rock and a hard place. He opened the door.

The laboratory was more or less as it usually was, with the TARDIS console sitting at odds among the workbenches and scientific apparatus, and the familiar blue box parked in a corner. However, the Doctor had obviously spent the last few hours bringing yet more of his ship's contents out into the lab. Perhaps he was having a spring clean, Yates thought. As for the Doctor himself, he was nowhere to be seen, but the door to the TARDIS was open. He must be in the bowels of the ship, dredging up yet more treasure. It never ceased to amaze Yates, how the Doctor was able to fit machinery of such size into such a small opening. If he had not helped the Doctor to remove the console, he would have suspected an elaborate act of sleight of hand.

He moved nearer to the TARDIS, eager for another peek at the

alien device, but just as he began to crane forward, putting up a hand to push open the door further, the Doctor bustled out, carrying some kind of helmet and wire construct. He instinctively flinched and admonished himself for jumping.

'Grab this power pack, will you?' The Doctor asked, inclining his head towards a modular unit slung precariously over his shoulder. Yates' conditioning to obeying orders kicked in, and he found himself acting as the Doctor's hod-carrier for the next few minutes, before remembering why he had come to see the Time Lord.

'I almost forgot. The Brigadier wants you to go and check out a new company called ReGenix. They've put out some kind of press release that says they can grow new limbs for people who've had accidents or were born with genetic defects.'

'I'm afraid not, Mike. As you can see, I've rather got my hands full here. He'll have to find another dogsbody this time.' Even while speaking to Mike, the Doctor's thoughts were obviously elsewhere. He was working out which devices should be placed where in the laboratory. As he worked out each fresh part of the puzzle, he went and put it into position, although to Yates, it looked just as randomly placed as before.

'He won't be very happy, I can tell you that for nothing.' Mike countered.

'Well, it's high time Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart discovered that we can't always get what we want,' Under his breath, the Doctor added, 'I have.' With that, he shooed Yates out of the laboratory without another word.

The sonic screwdriver was the dominant sound in the laboratory, as the Doctor made his final adjustments to the equipment he had been building in isolation. Since he ejected Yates, he had built himself a virtual cave of electronic devices and whatever bits and pieces he could commandeer from stores and cannibalise for his needs. At the heart of the machine, he had constructed an exoskeleton, lashed around a plain kitchen chair. The meshing of alien technology and the mundane looked strange, but the Doctor wasn't aiming for aesthetics. He sat down and strapped an armband to his left arm, wired into one of the banks of

monitors. It was designed to help him to maintain the alpha rhythms necessary to achieve his goal. It would provide a bass rhythm for him to concentrate upon, prolonging the necessary mental state for longer than he would be able to manage unaided. Once he was happy that it was not too tight, He reached for the helmet, wires streaming from the back like multi-coloured dreadlocks. The Doctor hesitated before donning the helm. He caught himself holding his breath, letting it out gently like a smoker feeling the rush of his addiction. Helmet in place, he could hold off no longer. His fingers hovered over the switch, twitching like a bomb disposal expert, unsure whether to cut the red or the green wire. He flipped the switch.

Burning! Ship going down! All dying; running. Not him. Has to stay. Take medicine. Alien killers! Never going home. Never see family...

Iseealittlesilhouetteofamanscaramouchescaramouchewillyoudothefar

Regenerating. First time. Hurts more than I thought it would. Wonder what I'll become? Heart feels as if it's splitting in two! Can't I go back? Want to go back...

I don't know what you want! You say that I have information, but I don't know what it is! You must believe me. I'm telling the truth...

Pull the trigger. Easy as blinking. They are traitors to the cause of peace. Do it, or they'll think you're a sympathiser. Is this murder or justice? They're looking at me! Don't look at me. DON'T LOOK AT ME!

Birth and rebirth. Countless lives, compressed down, turned back upon themselves and spat out as turbulent outbursts of emotion, one after another. Without control, without direction, back and forth, gaining momentum. The more the Doctor's mind adapted to process the information, the quicker it grew to exceed his limits once again.

So this is planet Earth. I've heard so much about it. No wonder you sent him here. Don't worry; I'll keep him busy. I'm looking forward to the challenge.

Murder or justice? Never going home. I don't know what you want!

NEVERMurdergoingDON'TknowDON'TlookBURNING!

The cycle of lives turned faster and faster, a rollercoaster where the Doctor would catch a momentary glimpse of something familiar before it was gone, replaced by something utterly alien. His mind was set so

entirely to the task that he could not break the connection, consciously or unconsciously, whether he wanted to or not. As the strain began to tell, his physical body began to shut down all autonomous systems, in order to focus on the non-physical plane. The Doctor's hearts began to beat asynchronously, and his muscles flexed and twitched of their own volition. He forgot how to breathe...

Jo Grant made her way to the laboratory where she worked with the Doctor. The Brigadier had suggested that her UNIT duties would include active assistance to the Doctor, but in reality it proved to be no more than handing test tubes to him and telling him how clever he was. Luckily, the Doctor usually chose not to keep himself cooped up inside, and she was able to find more to do than she expected. At least, that was the case in normal circumstances.

Today, the Doctor seemed to want nothing more than to be left alone. He had already put the Brigadier's back up by refusing to obey his orders, and as good as thrown Mike Yates out of the laboratory. She knew he had been suffering from depression since he last attempted to use the TARDIS and found that the Time Lords had stolen his ability to travel in time and space again. He had just helped them out of a sticky hole, and this was how they repaid him. To add insult to injury, his enemy, the Master had regained the use of his own ship, and was out there somewhere, doing goodness knew what. She hoped that where Yates had failed to win his confidence, she would be able to find out what was wrong, and try to help, with a smile and a shoulder to lean on, should he need it.

The soldiers were used to the Doctor being almost invulnerable. In front of them he did seem to play up to the macho image, stiff upper lip and all that. She knocked hesitantly on the door. There was no reply. Perhaps he could not hear her over the keening noise from within the laboratory. Plucking up courage to deflect his arguments about her being there during a delicate experiment or something, she pushed the door open and marched inside, where the noise grew louder. She could see that he had been busy. He had practically built himself an igloo out of machinery, with just a small section in the middle through which she could see him. It was then that she realised that the keening noise was

coming not from the machines, but from the Doctor. He was screaming! His body was in spasm, as the device fed his brain to overload. Jo assumed that he was being electrocuted, wired up as he was. Remembering her UNIT training, she fought the impulse to rush over to try and pull out the wires. She scanned the room quickly and found what she needed, a wooden broom. She grabbed for it, and pushed at the jumble of wires at the back of the Doctor's helmet, giving it a quick yank, dislodging the jerry-rigged cables. The Time Lord dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

The Doctor awoke with his head cushioned in Jo's lap, with the UNIT Medical Examiner shining a torch in his eyes. He squinted and put up a hand to shield his face.

'Get that thing out of my eyes!' he demanded.

'Well, he sounds normal enough.' suggested the Examiner, who had had many such run-ins with the Doctor in the past. For someone who called himself a Doctor, he appeared to have little faith in the medical community at large.

'Are you all right, Doctor?' Jo enquired, concern etching her face. 'I had to call the Doctor when you wouldn't wake up.'

'Yes, of course I'm all right!' he said sharply, 'Or at least I will be if you'll all just kindly leave me to my work.' He sat up and looked across at the helmet, wires ripped from their sockets. 'What did you do?' he turned immediately to Jo, since she was usually the root of his failed experiments, despite her best efforts.

'I thought you were being electrocuted!' she stammered defensively.

'Well, I wasn't. I had merely set the gain too high. A spot of fine-tuning and she would have been right as rain.' As it occurred to him, he began to adjust one of the many dials on the machine into which the wires from his helmet were plugged, momentarily forgetting that Jo was still there, in his desire to get the machine working.

'It didn't look like that to me.' she pouted, 'Next time, maybe I should just let you get on with it!'

'I wish you would!' The Doctor suddenly realised how sharp he was being with Jo, and apologised. 'I'm sorry, m'dear. It's just that I really must continue with my experiment... alone.' His arm was round her in a comforting gesture, and he had manoeuvred her to the door of the

laboratory before she realised. The M.E. took the hint and was out of the door before her.

'But…' Jo began.

'I'll be careful. Don't worry.' With that, the Doctor ushered her from the laboratory and shut the door, gently but finally. From the other side, Jo heard the key turn in the lock.

The experiment had been a qualified success for the Doctor. It proved that the Time Lords had not discovered the little back door he had left in the Matrix protocols when he last accessed the databank. He was unsure as to whether he could gain admittance at such a distance, using a crippled TARDIS, but it seemed that the TARDIS link to the Eye of Harmony on Gallifrey was more powerful than he had imagined. It confirmed his thoughts that his people were dangerously open to attack from alien powers. It was probably only the reputation of the Time Lords that they were dining on these days. Their culture was slipping into decline; there could be no doubt. If it had not been for the fact that he was exploiting that very weakness for himself, he would have informed them of the security breach to teach them a lesson.

The adjustments he had made to the set-up should filter out the sheer volume of input; minds overlaid over other minds, turned upon themselves like some cyber-genetic möbius strip, so that he could exercise some degree of control over what he experienced. The whole process would have been much easier if he had the Crown of Rassilon, or anything more than the rudimentary copy he had cobbled together. Still, by bypassing the front door into the system, he negated the need for a Presidential imprimatur in order to access the Matrix, which was something he would have been unable to fake. Satisfied that he had made the necessary alterations, he replaced the helmet, a little more hesitantly than before.

The ship is ablaze. There's nowhere left to run. All the escape pods are taken. Through the portholes, he can see them skipping across the atmosphere of the planet, lighting up the sky, as their pre-programming kicks in, seeking out the most habitable part of the world to make planetfall. No escape route for him, he will go down with this ship,

which is not his own. He can only hope that the enemy fighters are too intent on watching his destruction to notice the escapees, or it will all be for nought. All that remains to be done is to await the end, with as much dignity as he can muster. Who would have thought it would end like this?

FLIP.

Stealing a TARDIS hadn't been the hard part. You would think that the Gallifreyan elite would be more security conscious when it came to their transport devices, but it sometimes seemed as if they expected to lose at least one or two per cycle. One might almost suspect that they actively encouraged their malcontents to evacuate, to purify themselves of any radical elements that could lead to change.

FLIP.

Exile. How could the High Council find him guilty? He was merely doing his duty in the Library, as he had done for his entire career, to the best of his ability. Each day, much like another. There was comfort to be drawn from that. He never read the documents that passed through his hands, merely transposes the ancient texts from their fragile hardform into something accessible by the Lord President through the new database, the Matrix. If there was sensitive data in his head, he had no idea what it was, or how to get at it. He had thrown himself on the mercy of the court, and in their infinite wisdom, they had commuted his sentence from summary termination to exile on a distant world, where he would be unable to present a threat to global security. This was, they said, an act of compassion on their part, to draw a line under the excesses of the old days. To someone who had never set foot outside the Capitol, it was terrifying. He had met offworlders before, certainly. Your world would find it difficult to establish themselves as a galactic power without dealing with your neighbours. Alien ambassadors were always coming and going, and agents from a thousand worlds moved freely on Gallifrey with the blessing of the Lord President. It did not make him any more comfortable about his fate. The Lord President had even arranged for some of his *special* agents to transport him to the place of his confinement, in order to avoid contact with his fellow Gallifreyans. He felt uneasy at the thought of

them. Alien mercenaries from who knew where. How could you trust them? Creatures whose first loyalty is to whoever offers the most coins.

He is given little time to brood, as they come to collect their package. A motley crew indeed. He had heard stories of them, but his duties in the Great Library keep him... *kept* him very busy. He idly wonders what they were paid to transport him, what his market value is. At their head was some kind of hybrid man beast, obviously the veteran of many wars if his cybernetic arm was any indicator. They sense his hostility towards them and at a word from their leader, one of the women lays hands upon him, without so much as a *by your leave*... She's... she's in his mind... SHE'S IN MY HEAD!

He/I feel much calmer now. It will be fine. Another world means a second chance at life, without the need for regeneration. Perhaps they will have need of a librarian of his/my experience. His/my senses seem to retreat inside, to some distance, making me... him an observer to the events of his transportation; a feeling that gradually begins to wear off once the woman they call Fascination has moved away from his side. By then, the ship is readying itself for touchdown on his new home. Panic begins to well up in him once again. He sees Fascination pick up on his emotional distress, attracted by it? He holds up his hands to ward her off, forcing his gorge back down again, swallowing his fear until she loses his scent and wanders away again.

As the door to the ship opens, he takes his first look at the world before him. The lush vegetation and balmy atmosphere is unlike anything he has ever experienced before. He is weighed down by survival equipment that he will need to establish himself here, but the breathtaking spectacle of the panorama in front of him makes it seem an irrelevancy. The air... there is something in the air, a scent of alien fruits, perfuming the environment. Heady stuff, intoxicating him with the possibilities that await. They warn hint against staring into the triple suns dominating the sky, but he cannot help but be captured by it. For the first time, he wonders what it will be like when the suns rise. Every journey begins with but a single step. He takes it.

'Now listen, Doctor!' the Brigadier commanded, his blood pressure

rising to an unhealthy level. 'I must insist that you open the door right away.'

As expected, there was to be no reply.

Lethbridge-Stewart's patience was exhausted. 'Break it down.' he instructed, and the Private complied, putting his shoulder to the door. It took three attempts, but the doorframe eventually gave in to the pounding, never having been designed to withstand an assault. The Brigadier surveyed the nest that the Doctor had constructed for himself. He saw the Doctor ensconced in the midst of the contraption, just as Miss Grant had described it in her report. Stepping over the tangle of wires that lay across the floor, he strode across the laboratory to confront his errant Scientific Advisor.

The Doctor sat unmoving, save for an occasional muscle twitch, like a dreaming dog chasing rabbits. Lethbridge-Stewart had no inkling as to what the Doctor was trying to achieve, but he was damned if he was going to let his authority be undermined yet again. He had learned to tolerate the Doctor's foibles to an extent, but he could not afford to back down at every turn, for fear of losing the respect of his men. This situation needed to be brought to a swift resolution, especially as the odds had escalated in the interim. The time for inaction had passed.

The past few hours had taken a toll on the Time Lord. His face seemed to have aged markedly since the staff meal two nights previously, as if he had gone without sleep for a week or more. He looked peaceful enough now, insofar as one could be, sat upon a rickety chair and wired into a coronet which looked part Meccano set, and part fairy tree lights. The Brig stretched out a hand in order to give the Doctor a firm shake to rouse him from his trance. Before he could do so, the Doctor's other hand snaked across and gripped him fast, preventing him from moving at all.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you, old chap.' he mouthed, without inclining his head from staring straight ahead, eyes still closed. The Brigadier managed to control the urge to jump at the unexpected move, but pulled his arm back out of the Doctor's grip. The Doctor turned to face him, only opening his eyes once he had Lethbridge-Stewart in his line of sight. His eyes were as bloodshot as the Brig had suspected they would be. What he was unprepared for was the baleful glare that

the Doctor shot him.

'You should never attempt to interrupt a man when he is having an out-of-body experience.'

'Yes, well...' the Brigadier struggled to hang onto his own anger, as the Doctor tore him off a strip. 'I have to insist that you abandon this project of yours. The situation at ReGenix has escalated. I'm receiving reports that some of the workers have gone missing.'

'Then you'll have to send some of your soldier boys this time, Brigadier. My experiment is at a crucial juncture, and I do not have the time to go running errands at your whim.' The Doctor stood up, the extra height lending strength to his argument.

'Let me remind you, Doctor, that you are a registered member of my staff, and subject to my orders! Otherwise I shall have to consider terminating our little arrangement, and the cessation of your funding for little projects like this,' he swept his hand over the bank of electronic devices, to reinforce his words.

'I'd like to see you try!' The Doctor countered. 'My services are of more value to you than the primitive level of *help* I receive from Her Majesty's Government. And given the amount of classified information I possess about your little secret army operation, I'm sure you'd love another loose cannon out there where you can't keep an eye on me.' As the Brigadier's voice rose in protestation, the Doctor cut him off with another outburst, 'Or would you arrange a firing squad?'

'Don't be absurd, man!' Lethbridge-Stewart was taken aback at the accusation, but it would take time for the adrenalin rush to subside. 'We have places for people who know too much, to keep them out of harm's way. For their own protection, and for the security of the realm. Places that even *you* won't have heard about.'

'Be seeing you, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart.' The Doctor snapped, his interest in the conversation waning. He turned his back on the soldiers, and began to adjust the sensors on the equipment before him, as if they had already left.

'Hmph! Consider this a final warning, Doctor. In future, I expect you to show a sight more cooperation. Come on, Pike.' With that, the Brigadier turned on his heel and made a withdrawal, not yet ready to

call the Doctor's bluff, if it was one.

He had been travelling among the stars, working his passage using whatever skills he had acquired along the way for something like forty years. Sometimes, he found himself in dire straits which proved wasteful in regenerations, but that was the price of freedom, he supposed. Better to live like the brief candle that burns brightly for such a short time than the eternal beacon beside Omega's memorial, which remained alight dimly and predictably for all time, back on Gallifrey.

Sometimes he had done questionable things, acts that were not by his choice, but born of necessity, and other times he had performed acts of bravery and selflessness. He had been a pirate, a lawgiver, a lock-picker and a locksmith. He had taken lives for little reason other than his continued survival, and he had sacrificed one of his own lives in order to prevent the death of thousands. Wherever he washed up, he imagined that this would be the place he would want to lay his bones down to rest, but his nature would always get the better of him, and the wanderlust would take him on again. He had managed to sweet-talk his way onto a freighter that was going to be skirting an uncharted region of the galaxy, which interested him greatly. He never asked the Captain why his trip would take him by such a circuitous route, figuring that contraband was bound to be at the heart of it. If he had learned one thing abundantly, it was that curiosity was sometimes better kept to oneself.

If only his curiosity had led to discretion on his part, he would never have set foot on the ship in the first place. Conversations with the crew, at their instigation, not his own, another trick he had picked up in his travels, suggested that the Captain was not known for his fair trading, and that one of the reasons they were transporting their cargo so far from the normal shipping lanes was because they would be travelling through the territory of someone the Captain had cheated in a previous deal, who would be only too pleased to renew acquaintances with him, should their paths cross. By their course, it would be a million to one odds that they should come across their enemy, and so of course, that is precisely what happened. He felt sorry for the crew, who were merely bondsmen, following their master's decrees. Which is why he

helped them to reach the escape pods when the inevitable firelight began, and hope ran out on them. When the tide of battle went against them, the Captain was, the first to abandon ship, as he had done before; King Rat leaving the sinking ship. His infamous luck was against him this day, as one of the enemy fighters spied his pod, and raked fire across it until it found a weak spot and the seal ruptured, spacing the surprised Captain.

Witnessing it all from the bridge of the freighter, he prepared himself for the end. There were no more escape pods, and the ship was aflame. The flight console was so much junk, and it would not be long before the ship would be unable to sustain orbit, and it would start to decay, raining destruction on the planet below.

It looked as though he was about to make his mark on the universe, albeit not in the manner he had intended. He felt regret, that was only to be expected, he supposed. What did surprise him was that he felt a longing for home, something he never expected, given the circumstances of their parting. What a pity that he would not have the opportunity to consider his reawakened feelings. He could hear the superstructure of the ship beginning to buckle under the torture of its injuries.

Just then, he heard another noise, straining to be heard above the rending of metal, but there nonetheless. Was that what he thought it was? He had to be imagining it...

'Shut it down, Sergeant Benton.' Benton hesitated for a moment, concerned at the harm he may cause to the Doctor, before obeying the Brigadier's order. Almost immediately, the machines fell silent, leaving them to consider their actions.

The Doctor was confused by the sudden shift in his perceptions. One minute he had a solid form, and the next, his psyche was ejected into the limbo realm of the Matrix itself, a living spirit adrift among the dead. He felt no pull from his true body; no clue as to which way he should go, while long-dead minds began to take notice of him and cluster nearer, attracted by his life energies. Then, as luck would have it, he saw a glimpse of silver thread leading him home to his physical body, and made a leap into the unknown. Whether the silver thread

was real or merely a metaphor given form by his mind, he had no time to ponder. Luckily, it was the right choice to make. He tore the coronet from his head and pulled off the wrist guards that bound him to the machines, separating himself from it completely for the first time in over a week. The only thing that prevented him from laying hands on the Brigadier was the timely intervention of Benton, who saw what was coming, and stepped between the men.

'You militaristic buffoon! You very nearly left my mind marooned light years from my body, with your blundering! What earthly good would I be able to do you then, eh?' The Doctor talked a good fight, but his exertions had taken a toll on him, and a wave of dizziness came upon him, making him stagger slightly, and have to lean on Benton for support.

Benton looked to his superior officer for an explanation. 'You said that turning the power to his machines wouldn't be dangerous.'

'I thought he was exaggerating to get me to leave him alone.' After a pause, he added, 'My apologies, Doctor. I had to get your attention, and this was the only way I could think to snap you out of this... addiction of yours.'

'Addiction, you say? Poppycock!' The Doctor retorted, eyeing the Brigadier warily.

'The important thing is, because you've been cooped up in here, contemplating your navel, I despatched Captain Yates and Miss Grant to take your place, investigating the disappearances at the ReGenix company, and... well, they've also vanished.'

The Doctor appeared to gain a little strength at those words. After a fuller briefing of the situation, he felt able to make an educated guess at the identity of the culprits behind the ReGenix incident. He made his way into the TARDIS, and after a few minutes, he emerged, carrying a lightweight case, containing some kind of transmitting device.

'If you set the frequency on this to the lowest range you can, it will force the ReGenix aliens to transform into their normal forms, where they will be much more vulnerable to your men. I'd come with you, but I think I would be something of a liability as I am at the moment. I hadn't realised just how much the machine would take out of me.' Even the conversation was something of a strain on him at present.

'You'd better take yourself off to the medical centre, Doc.' said Benton, concerned to see the usually invulnerable alien reduced as he was.

'Is that an order, Brigadier?' The Doctor asked weakly, a little smile appearing as he did so; a touch of the old Doctor emerging from hibernation.

'Consider it a suggestion, Doctor. The request of a friend.'

'Fair enough.' As the Brigadier and Benton left to put his device to good use, the Doctor haltingly stood, debating his next action.

Retrieving a power coupling from his ship, the Doctor replaced the dead power cable hooked into the UNIT laboratory supply, diverting power from the TARDIS' own supply. In recent months, he had been careful to conserve the Artron reserves of the ship, in case he needed it later, running the console off the mains instead, which was perfectly adequate for the small scale use he needed it for while trapped on Earth. Minor adjustments complete, he sat back down and made himself one with the Matrix once again, while he assured himself that he would limit his experience from now on, to make sure that he did not continue to do himself harm.

The Doctor had been randomly surfing the Matrix for days, flitting from life to life to life, tasting a little here and there, supposedly at random, but he was invariably drawn to those most like himself, rogue Time Lords with a yen to explore further than the world of their birth, or to make their mark on the universe at large.

The Matrix was the repository of memory for the Time Lords, and contained memory prints of many of their number, when they reached the end of their extended life cycles. As Gallifrey grew inwards upon itself, and the sedentary lifestyles of modern Time Lords could extend to over twelve thousand years, that meant that an extremely large percentage of the stored lives were nothing more exciting than those of civil servants; paper shufflers whose knowledge was received by rote rather than from personal experience. The Doctor skipped over these grey personalities as soon as he identified them. The number of fellow rogues whose lives he brushed across surprised him. Were there really *that* many of them loose in the universe now? He had always fancied

himself as an individual, drumming to a different beat. The knowledge that he was but one of many seemed to diminish his act of defiance. Their reasons for leaving were as individual as snowflakes, but anyone with the will to see it all could trace certain patterns of behaviour. And the Doctor *wanted* to see it all.

A thought struck him. The one thing that every life he shared had in common was that in the end, they returned home to their birthplace, regardless of the reasons for their leave-taking. If they had not, their memories would not have been preserved within the Matrix. He began to wonder if this was to be his end, if he would end up as a cold recording, preserved against the ages for as long as Gallifrey prevailed. Was there some kind of genetic imperative coded away within each of them, that caused them to return to their homeworld at the end of their lives? Were they like the salmon? If that thought could be taken as possible, was it not also possible that certain of them were *programmed* to go out into the universe in the first place. This sort of thinking took the wind out of the Doctor's sails. It did not bear consideration. If true, then his individuality was a sham. He was nothing more than a clockwork explorer, wound up by his creators and sent off to gather information about the universe, and then return like a homing pigeon, with experiences to share with the High Council, allowing them to remain in their bottle city. The concept was monstrous beyond comprehension.

When he was sentenced to exile in the beginning, he... no, that was not right. He *chose* to leave Gallifrey, stealing an old TARDIS, or was it a new untested prototype? That was strange. He could clearly remember his first time outside, but the memories conflicted with each other. He had spent so many years on this world, lovely tri-solar Dakera... No, it was Earth, but his mind could not separate one origin from another. He had spent thirty-eight lonely years on Dakera and also been exiled on Earth, where he had a surrogate family of sorts. He knew them both to be the truth, but at the same time, realised that there was something awry. Still, the desire to uncover the truth of his ancestry was weak compared to his need to disprove his theory regarding the core of his very personality. He plunged back into the

Matrix sea, seeking out the fiery individuals in an ocean of grey.

After being debriefed concerning the events at ReGenix, Jo Grant was desperate to talk about her experiences with the Doctor. Using the flimsy excuse of returning his portable generator, which had unfortunately not survived prolonged usage against the ReGenix aliens, but no doubt the Doctor could salvage something from the wreckage, she visited the medical centre. Staff Nurse Quinn was unaware that the Doctor was supposed to report in for a check-up. Jo had a bad feeling about it, and the two of them went immediately to the UNIT laboratory, pausing only to grab a medikit. The Doctor had slumped from his chair upon the floor, held up in an uncomfortable sitting position by the spaghetti wiring which connected him to the machines. He showed no signs of physical discomfort, unaware of any stimulus that affected his body. His mind was absorbed completely within the Matrix.

Quinn was about to pull at the wires that fed directly into the Doctor's skull, but Jo stopped her, cautious not to do anything to further endanger the Doctor's life.

'I heard once that if you wake up a sleepwalker, they'll die. If there's *any* chance that this is like that, we mustn't unplug him. The shock could kill him.'

'We have to do something!' Quinn warned. 'It seems as if the device is draining away his life-force at a highly accelerated rate. I don't know what the lifespan of a Time Lord is, but he's burning it up while he stays hooked up to that thing.' They were torn by indecision, unable to act one way or another.

'This thing,' Jo gestured at the machinery with hatred, 'it's like an addiction to him. He can't stop himself from using it, and I don't even know what it does! It certainly isn't making him any happier.'

'Oh my God! You don't suppose that it's some kind of Time Lord suicide machine, do you?' Quinn wished she had not said it aloud almost as much as she wished she had never had the thought in the first place.

'No.' Jo answered automatically, without thinking. 'No! She repeated, refusing to let such a thought enter her head. The Doctor was depressed about being stuck on Earth again, but he would never

consider... that.

'Sorry. Thinking like a Doctor... You called it an addiction.' Quinn had the germ of an idea. 'Well, if a patient is admitted with an addiction problem, the first thing to do is to decrease the dosage, not to cut them off cold turkey. Any idea how we could do that?' Jo tried to think of what the Doctor had done to the machine after his initial collapse.

'He was doing something to this machine over here.' she finally decided. Looking at the bank of dials and switches, she tried to cast back her mind to what exactly the Doctor had done, though at the time, she had been caught up in her anger that she was being ignored. There were too many to choose from, and none of them seemed an obvious choice to Jo. Closing her eyes to avoid distraction, she mimicked the way she remembered the Doctor moving in front of the machine, compensating for his extra height. When she opened them again, her hand was hovering in front of one of the dials, no more remarkable than any of the others surrounding it.

'Are you sure that's the one?' Quinn asked hopefully.

'Not one hundred percent,' Jo replied honestly, 'But we're running out of options, aren't we?' The Doctor had grown visibly weaker since they had been with him. 'I'm going to try it. Forgive me if I'm wrong, Doctor...' Hesitantly, she began to twist the dial anti-clockwise, almost imperceptibly at first, watching the Doctor for any sign of change. The machine hum changed in timbre just a little, but nothing else seemed to have been affected, for good or ill. She turned the dial as far as she dared, and stepped away from the machine, out of ideas.

'Oh Doctor, why couldn't you have left an instruction book?'

'Oh Doctor, why couldn't you have left an instruction book?' The voice seemed oddly familiar, but he could not see the speaker. It seemed to come from the air around him, but that could not be, even on a world of marvels such as this. There must have been a body, and so his mind created one, indistinct at first, since he could not recall a face to accompany the oh-so familiar voice. Female and humanoid, but the rest remained a mystery for the present.

The Agency informed him of their pleasure at the successful conclusion of his inaugural mission for them. There was concern

expressed at the hesitation before pulling the trigger, but they soothed his fraying nerves with the knowledge that most operatives were nervous the first time. In time, obeying orders without question would become second nature.

'Can you hear me, Doctor?' The voice interrupted again, making it difficult to concentrate on his handler's words. Strangely, no-one else in the antechamber seemed to have heard the woman, hovering just on the periphery of his vision. Her features remained undefined, as if seen from the corner of his eye, even as he stared directly at her. He tried to ask if anyone else saw her, but they continued to deliver their lines without faltering. More unnerving still was the way they responded to questions that never left his lips, but remained as thoughts echoing dully in his head, while he attempted to fathom the mystery of the woman. Her voice was definitely familiar to him, but he struggled to make sense of the many, many faces that swam before his mind's eye, no longer able to distinguish those he knew himself and those he had merely borne witness to. It did not help that as he began to think of possible candidates, his mind would overlay their features upon her, trying to make her fit the criteria he had to go on. She was by turns short, tall, fat, thin, dark and light-complexioned, morphing constantly as his mind fine-tuned her appearance into something familiar to him.

'I don't think it worked.' She said to another person, out of sight. Her voice was inappropriate to the form she wore, and set off on another blur of change. Blonde hair, he suddenly received in a flash of inspiration, which was instantly communicated to the vision before him. As if a big part of the puzzle had fallen into place, the woman's form came sharply into focus, in the shape of Miss Josephine Grant.

'Jo.' He mouthed her name, both on the mental plane and croaked out aloud, startling her and Staff Nurse Quinn, just at the lowest point of desperation.

The Doctor's eyes fluttered open, unused to the activity after the prolonged period spent in the Matrix through his makeshift connection. He felt as though he had spent fourteen rounds in a boxing ring with Aggedor, the Royal Beast of Peladon, his muscles ached so much. He was barely able to move, let alone defend himself from the onslaught of Jo Grant smothering him with hugs of relief. Quinn, while not as

ebullient as Jo, was keen to determine his state of health, her training coming to the fore. The Doctor allowed himself to be disconnected from the machines piece by piece, lifting his arm feebly to let Quinn remove his restraints.

Between the two of them, they managed to get him away from the lure of the device, and laid him down on the laboratory floor, where Quinn could examine him properly. It appeared to be nothing more serious than extreme exhaustion, which would explain his confusion. At one point, he called Quinn 'Larna', and did not seem responsive to being called by the only name they knew him by. Once he had been made as comfortable as possible, Quinn used the telephone to call down a couple of orderlies, who could arrange a wheelchair to transport the Time Lord to the medical facilities where he could be looked after properly.

Once the Doctor had strengthened to the point of being able to stand unaided, the Brigadier had needed to post a guard on his door to prevent him from going straight back to his laboratory. Jo Grant spent her days by his side, trying to keep him occupied, but his uneasiness was apparent, as he struggled with his bedclothes, unable to get comfortable.

'You don't understand, Jo. It's very important that I finish what I started.'

'What's that, Doctor? Putting yourself right back here in the hospital?' It was not in Jo's nature to argue with people. She preferred to keep people happy, and if that meant agreeing with them, she usually complied with their wishes. Over the past few days, she had learned a lot about how to stand firm against the Doctor. It helped that she knew she was acting in his best interests. 'How many more times do I have to tell you? Doctor's orders. If you hook yourself back up to that... *thing*, your body isn't strong enough to cope.'

'But...' he began, but Jo put up a hand to silence him. The Doctor was taken aback by her assertiveness, and lay there, slack-jawed.

'If you so much as think of going near it again, I'll smash it up myself.' Once she had finished, Jo found herself just as surprised at what she had said as the Doctor had been. The silence between them

may as well have been a brick wall.

Exploiting her newfound authority, Jo decided that fresh air was the best tonic for the Doctor. An escape from the confines of the medical centre at least, even if they could not stretch to some alien locale, where the sky was liquid and the trees made of metal. The Doctor was less than enthusiastic towards her suggestion.

'A picnic? Dear girl, do you take me for an infant now? What can this little piece of rock offer me that can compare to the panoply of worlds I can visit from within this compound? I don't know what it was that I could have possibly seen in the place. Obviously, my earlier self was easier to amuse than I.' He crossed his arms and his demeanour suggested he intended to adopt Gandhi's approach of peaceful protest, regarding Jo's idea. Her face fell, and her lip began to tremble. The Doctor attempted to hold fast to his resolve, but it was difficult to keep it up.

'I don't care how realistic your machine is, Doctor. It can't be the same as real life! You've never *been* to these places. You've been sitting in an old UNIT issue chair in a laboratory full of science junk, plugged into a box of wires and circuit boards you've cobbled together.' She pulled out her purse, and retrieved a handful of photographs taken on her last holiday. 'These were taken when I went to Scarborough last summer. You can see the seafront and everything in these,' She started flipping through them, showing them to the Doctor one at a time, 'but it doesn't mean that you've been there, does it?' She threw the photographs upon the Doctor's bed, close to tears.

'I'll have you know that the Matrix on Gallifrey is a bit more than a computer! When I'm in communion with it, everything that the person whose mind I'm joined with felt at the time, I also experience. It's not like looking at a few holiday snaps.'

'It still wasn't you who was there! It was somebody else's life, and all you could do was watch what *they* decided to do. If you were on a beach with two palm trees, and wanted to sit under one of them - if they didn't do that, you'd have been stuck, wouldn't you?'

'You humans, with your three-dimensional way of looking at things... You can't possibly understand the situation I'm describing. I clearly

remember watching my first sunrise on the planet Dakera; the first rays of light warming my face, and the sand between my toes.' His mind drifted back to that time, his eyes ceasing to focus upon Jo, much to her annoyance.

'But have you ever been there?' She pressed.

'Yes. Of course I... You know, I'm not sure. It's the strangest thing...' The Doctor grew puzzled as he tried to identify, if the memory was his own or an implant. When he could not, his alarm was palpable. As if his past was not clouded enough, he had voluntarily stirred up the waters to the point where he truly was an enigma, even to himself. He could only hope that when he next regenerated, such additions would be erased, or at least dulled to the point where he could distinguish them from his real past. He could not help but wonder why he had not experienced a side effect such as this when he had jury-rigged a similar device back on Gallifrey. His mind whirling with possibilities, he could only conclude that because he had been infiltrating the Matrix at distance, using the TARDIS to piggy-back the signal, it had amplified the effect somehow, or circumvented the safety protocols which were built into the Coronet of Rassilon. Whatever, he felt humbled by the scale of his arrogance on this occasion, and when Jo continued to wheedle at him about the picnic, he passively agreed to go.

Benton relished the opportunity to drive Bessie, acting as chauffeur for the day to Jo and the Doctor. Under normal circumstances, the Doctor was fiercely protective of the old girl, and certainly would not have allowed any of the UNIT soldiers to drive her, but he was in little state to argue.

The Doctor did his best to keep up with Jo's small talk as they travelled, paying very little attention to their surroundings, unless she pointed them out to him, which she often did. Her commentary was infectious, and in time, he found himself seeing the places they passed through her eyes, in an altogether healthier manner than the way in which he had been doing so in the recent past. Part of the joy came about because Jo would describe something wrongly, giving the Doctor the opportunity to correct her, gradually reasserting his position in their relationship, which made him feel less vulnerable.

They passed many places which the Doctor had only read about, but never had the opportunity to visit, or had been there in ages past, before the advent of the industrial revolution and the march of time had carved them into new forms. They reached a narrow coastal road, and as they rounded a blind corner, the expanse of wooded mountainside gave way to a powerful view across the shore and of the sea. Sometimes the Doctor needed to be reminded that such sights existed. The sun was at its zenith, making the sand almost glow.

'Can we stop here?' He asked, enraptured by the place. Jo had planned to go a little further, but did not want to do anything that might break the spell. Benton parked Bessie by the quayside, and started to pull out the picnic hamper. The Doctor had already deserted the car, and was climbing the few steps down to the beach, treading carefully over the loose shingle underfoot. Jo had difficulty keeping up with hint, trying to make sure that he was unlikely to stumble in his weakened condition.

The Doctor spotted an old fishing boat, slightly skewed and aground, halfway up the beach, and made for it, drawing strength from his sense of purpose. Benton saw the speed at which he and Jo were pulling away, and looking down at the hamper, folding chairs and parasol he was going to have to carry all the way over to them, he exhaled sharply and began the descent. What better way to work up an appetite?

The Doctor sat in the stern of the boat, poised theatrically, as though he fancied himself a captain. Jo passed him another sandwich, rescued from the fast-diminishing plate in front of Benton, and he attacked it hungrily, his taste for both food and life restored to something approximating their normal levels. Jo sat with her legs swinging over the edge of the boat, living in the moment while she could.

'Better than sitting in the lab with your head wired into the mains, eh, Doc?' Benton offered, snaffling the last of the picnic provisions in one fell swoop.

'You have no idea.' The Doctor replied. He decided that he would quite like another sandwich, only to find the plate as clean as a whistle, and Benton with an assortment of empty crisp packets beside him.

'Perfect,' he thought. And hopped over the side of the boat onto the sand, and sat down, removing his shoes and socks.

He let the sun fall upon him, luxuriating in the feel of it on his skin. His feet scrunched up the sand and he thought of Dakera, and he *knew*, he just knew the difference. He broke into a run, waving his arms about and whooping like some demented ape, chasing away the gulls, or dancing with them, Jo was unable to tell. She smiled, seeing him back to his inexplicable old self. Benton worried that he would over-exert himself, and that he would have to carry him back to the car.

Suddenly, the Doctor stopped sharply, and he fell to the ground. Jo and Benton rushed to his side, fearing the worst after seeing him putting such a strain on his constitution so soon, but he was clutching at his foot, which was leaking crimson on the sand. He had trodden on a piece of broken glass, not deeply, but enough to require some assistance. Benton sprinted for the first aid kit in Bessie, while Jo and the Doctor pressed the wound together, and did their best to clean the sand away from the cut.

As Jo dabbed antiseptic liquid on the wound, the Doctor winced at its touch. Benton was still a little out of breath after his run, having gotten a stitch from exerting himself so soon after eating all those sandwiches. 'They ought to have a litter picker round here to stop this sort of thing from happening. That's put a bit of a dampener on your day, hasn't it?'

'Not at all,' The Doctor answered. 'It's absolutely okay. It reminded me about peas.'

'Peas? Why on Earth would it do that, Doctor?' Jo was incredulous.

'You remember what I said about the food dispenser on the TARDIS? Well, this is like those perfect peas. If we'd come out here and had a perfect time with perfect weather and perfect food. Just enough to eat,' He glared at Benton, before smiling. 'Then would we really remember it properly? Something like this happening, it's *real*, isn't it? A touchstone to measure the rest of the day against. Not perfect, but real life. That has to be more important than a nice memory, hasn't it?' Jo began to dab at the Doctor's foot again, cleaning away the fresh blood. When she looked up into his face, there was a

tear in his eye. She told herself that it was the antiseptic at work.

Where Were You

TOM BECK

Go. Go anywhere. *Anywhere*.

Freedom. Liberty. License.

Responsibility.

That's the trade-off, isn't it? Responsibility, duty, faith. Reliability.

Someone once said, you buy your freedom at the price of absolute responsibility. Whatever you do, stand up for it.

Whatever you say you're going to do, *do*. You *are* what you do.

Reputation is a curse. People come to expect things of you.

Always there when you're needed. *Always.*

Why?

How?

Remarkable how calm you feel once you've decided to die.

Jerrin feels anything but calm.

'Where *is* He?' he mutters, too loudly. Other people hear him besides Jome.

'He'll *be* here,' Jome hisses back, impatiently. 'You *know* He'll be here!'

'But *when*?'

'Shhh, you're upsetting everyone else!'

It's dark and crowded in the cave. The opening is small and very high up a cliff, overlooking the valley. Overlooking *Them*.

Lots of Them.

Terrin crawls into the cave just then, ignores his kid brother, salutes Jome. 'Scouts and sappers in place, sir,' he whispers. 'Runners waiting to spread the word.' Jome nods grimly.

'So we wait,' he says.

Some of the others in the cave nod back, their faces both bleak and hopeful. All their plans are finally on the line, The Day has finally arrived. And if *He* doesn't show up...

But He *will* show up. He *always* shows up just when he's needed! Jome has studied Him, His history, His legend. He's the reason Jome planned this operation in the *first* place.

Insane perhaps to count on the intervention of an outsider, but this is not just any outsider. Joram and Jome have studied Him for *years*! The Trove, the massive database they discovered inside the City, was big, bigger than big; easily the biggest they'd ever heard of, and there was vastly too much information in it even for Joram to get through. But what he read was unmistakable, clear.

Jome wishes Joram were here, but he's at the southern end of the valley coordinating things down there. Trying to match the brother as a fighter whom he'd long ago surpassed as a scholar. Jome wonders the wisdom of his brother's strategy, the probability of it actually. They've argued about it incessantly - not in front of any of the others, of course. Even today, Jome still has doubts. Still, Joram is absolutely confident they've gotten it right, figured out the pattern. *His* pattern. If not, he's gambling all their lives on a galactic hoax.

The hours pass. Their planet's third and fourth moons rise, the first and second begin to fall. First morning is approaching. There's definite light over the hills far across on the other side of the valley.

Another scout scuttles into the cave mouth. 'Sir,' he starts, but Jome cuts him off.

'I *know*!' he hisses.

'Jome!' Jerrin whispers urgently, 'What do we do? It's almost daylight!'

What *do* they do? If they wait here, eventually someone down in the valley is going to notice something - probably as soon as first sun rises. If they attack before he arrives, they have no chance. If they call it off, who knows when they'll get another chance?

Jome wishes Koba were here, but he's sent his most trusted assistant to a cave far at the north end of the valley. The plan is to form two pincers, to catch the Captains in a trap. But first, *He* is supposed to be here, to lead them, inspire them, to tell them what to do. To figure out a way to defeat the Captains without bloodshed, maybe without even a fight. Only, He's *not here*.

'Okay,' Jome says, 'we can't wait here any longer. We'll attack. Now.' Voices start to speak, but Jome cuts them off. 'I know He's out there. I *know* it! He's cleverly doing something to undermine their defences. He *has* to be. He's probably counting on us to show up just in the nick of time and rescue him, or something.' Jome looks around, sees a few nods, a few encouraging looks. This must be leadership, then, to convince others of something you scarcely believe yourself. He takes a deep breath, goes on. 'So - we attack! Attack!'

And the word spreads. Attack!

Only, the word doesn't spread evenly. There is rough ground between this cave and all the other caves, rocks and scars and shards, scrabble and gullies, and some of the runners don't get there on time. These men are rebels, not trained warriors. They're driven by passion, not fired by discipline.

They don't stand a chance.

And *He* never arrives.

It is a bloody slaughter.

You always remember your first TARDIS. Even if it isn't really yours.

The Doctor is incredibly proud of his travelling machine. He spends hours polishing the Time Rotor, relining the bearings, recalibrating the sensors, traversing the corridors, communing with its inner core, trying to get to know it better. He meditates in the Zero Room, sips tea in the Cloisters, devours the immense Library, savours the astonishingly eclectic Art Gallery, or simply stares at the Scanner with its infinite window on the Universe outside.

Such a beautiful machine. He's so happy he stole it.

Okay, so 'stole' isn't really the right word. Neither are 'borrowed,' 'appropriated," liberated,' or forgot-to- ask-permission-before-taking-it-out-on-a-little jaunt.'

He *needed* it. Yes, that's the favoured expression of the moment. Need.

It's a rationalisation, no question. He can imagine his tutor shaking his head, disappointment mixed with grudging indulgent respect in his voice as he upbraids the young reprobate. '"Need'? did you say?' he can hear him muttering. '"Need'? Why is your 'need' greater than

anyone else's? Answer me that!'

To which, of course, there *is* no answer. The Doctor has none, won't even try to fake one. He saw an *opportunity* - all right, he *manufactured* an opportunity - to steal - *yes*, he admits it, steal - a TARDIS and he took it. The fact that he deliberately chose this old, antiquated model hardly mitigates his crime.

But look at that universe! The stars like diamonds scattered on velvet, nebulae and gaseous clouds and binary stars, black holes, supernovae, coal sacks and quasars. Jovian planets and hollow moons, beings that live inside suns and inhabit the very fabric of the Vortex itself. He's read about all of this in class, of course, even experienced it inside simulators. But now he's seeing it with his own eyes! And at such a young age - relatively speaking, of course. The Time Lords do send out expeditions to explore, but not many, and the queue to participate is longer than a Panditorean Conger. The Doctor probably would have had to wait until at least his second regeneration to get to go.

But now, he's here. He's *doing* it, not just reading about it.

A tug of guilt at what he's left behind. For *whom* he has left behind. There was no time to explain, no time even to say goodbye. For their sake, he hopes the Castellon has downplayed it all, sparing the Chancellery Guard embarrassment while saving his family from any further shame. One day, he will go back. Oh yes, he will go back. If for no other reason, than to rescue *her*.

But not just yet...

Sorrowfully, Jome glances at the bodies, reluctant to look, unable not to. He both wants to find out and doesn't.

Waiting won't make it not have happened, however.

He looks. Recognizes most of them. There was a time when he would have recognized them all. Probably recruited them all personally. Now, there are dead men lying there he never saw before while they were alive.

While they were alive. They joined the rebellion because of him, even if he didn't know them. Joined because they'd heard him speak or heard someone he'd inspired. Joined to fight the Captains, to free their

people. Taking this daft, insane decision because of him.

Now they're dead because of him.

It is *unbearable*. There is Kilif, his best friend as a boy. Kilif, clumsy and fragile, he should never have let him come along. Look what hero-worship gets you.

He sees Terrin, and he feels something coming up. Forces it back down. If he loses it now, he'll never get his composure back. He actually hopes Jerrin died, too, rather than see how they butchered his kid brother. Kid brother.

There are so many of them! He didn't even know they had this many *live* recruits, let alone dead ones. Broli and Tevix must have been really busy this past month. Really busy signing up corpses.

The longer he doesn't see Joram, the worse it actually gets. For Jome is starting to feel some hope, and he knows that if and when that hope is finally dashed, it'll be worse than if he was the first body to be brought in.

The cave is full of them. Too many, in fact; they're running out of room, have to leave some of them out in the open, where the scavengers can get at them. No way to bury them all before next sunsdown, the way the ritual requires. Jome hopes for a Dispensation of Need, according to the Fourth Book. Not that the Captains care about that sort of thing. Jome bets they're happy they killed so many rebels that they can't follow their forbidden religion.

Bastards! He feels the old seething anger rise, the savage righteous ire that galvanized him to start this whole rebellion years ago. Blind white-hot hatred, inarticulable, burning like fever.

And see what it got us, he reproaches himself. See what it got Terrin, see what it got Kilif and Breza and Sparok and - and - and *Joram*.

Lying at his feet, full of holes, covered in blood. Eyes wide open, an expression of shock, disbelief. Despair.

Eternity passes. A micromillisecond passes. No time at all passes.

Stray, irrelevant thoughts intrude. How am I going to tell Mum? How am I going to tell his wife? What am I going to do now?

Who'll operate the Trove?

The Trove. *Him*.

Anger stirs.

Tears, not of grief this time, dampen his eyes. Teeth grit, bowels clench, fists too. Bile and acid rise. He turns away from his brother's corpse, starts to stomp away.

A hand touches his shoulder from behind. Raging, Jome whirls around, dukes up, ready to strike out blindly.

It is Koba. For briefest of moments, Jome doesn't know him. Then, of course, he backs off. He has no desire to beat up his second-in-command.

'I'm okay. I'm -'

'I know. I saw.'

Silence. Jome and Koba have never actually liked each other, as it turns out, but they've managed to work well together. Koba doesn't want to be the leader, he knows he can't reach out and inspire people like Jome can; and strangely, this doesn't bother him. He's also no strategist, but he's an excellent tactician, and he has a patience for details that dwarfs Jome's capacity for taking pains. Tell him what to do, and he figures out how best to get it done.

Only now, Jome has no idea what to do.

'What happened, Koba?' Jome asks in a harsh whisper.

'We got our arses whipped,' his subordinate replies, in a dull, matter-of-fact voice that betrays no emotion.

'That's not what I mean. Where *was* He? He didn't show up!'

'You know my feelings on this, Jome. I was never for trusting him in the first place.' Jome hears the clear lack of a capital letter when Koba refers to 'him.'

'He was our only hope, Koba. You don't know what - what Joram found.'

'You told me. How many times did you *tell* me? Ancient records the Captains swiped from somewhere. You don't even know that Joram could really understand what he was reading, the language was so archaic.'

'That's only what we tell people, Koba, to discourage them from trying to break into the Ship and access the Trove on their own. It's too

dangerous, and we can't risk the Captains discovering it. The Trove is much more sophisticated than we've ever let anyone know. Only my father, myself, and Joram - Joram - knew the truth.'

'Okay, but that doesn't change anything. I know you thought he was brilliant, Jome, and maybe he was. But to pin all our hopes on some legend about an interstellar saviour!'

'He's no legend, Koba. He exists. I *know* it! I'll *prove* it!'

'How?'

'Get me back into the City. I'll show you the Trove. You'll see, it'll convince even you.'

'What good will that do? You told me you can't operate it.'

'Sometimes I can. Joram taught me a bit.'

'But what's the use? He's not here. He's not coming.'

'I'm not giving up, Koba. Not now. Not after - all that it's cost us. I'll find him. Make Him tell us where He was, why He didn't come help us.

'Just get me into the City, Koba. You'll *see*.'

The Doctor was not one of those students at the Academy chosen to become a pilot; his degree was in Cosmic Science, which is a sort of catch-all for the young Time Lord who isn't yet ready to specialise - or whose mind and curiosity could never be contained in a single, narrow field. Everyone gets to take a spin in a TARDIS simulator at some point in their studies, however, but everyone also knows that the simulators are a joke compared to the real thing.

Not a very funny joke, either, the Doctor reflects as he tries to figure out exactly where in the universe he is - and when.

Although the Doctor would be loath to admit it to anyone -even to himself - he has been unable to steer the ship. And he's not getting better at it, either. He must have been daydreaming during the one class on 'Theory of TARDIS Navigation and Helmsmanship' they offered at the Academy; too busy thinking of his thesis on the chemical synthesis of artron energy, probably. At the time, it hadn't yet occurred to him to - ahem - acquire a TARDIS of his own.

Still, it's rather fun, this bouncing around from place to place and time to time. An adventure, which is practically illegal on Gallifrey. There, you know almost everything that will happen to you throughout

your thirteen lives on the day you're born. The few nonconformists, like him and his rambunctious friends and classmates, are looked upon as dangerous malcontents, possibly even maniacs. Not a bad reason to get away.

It was not a good time to stand out, to think for yourself - as if there were *ever* a good time for that on Gallifrey - and they'd made it all worse by deliberately taking contrary, even obstreperous stands on just about everything. Going to classes, spouting accepted academic orthodoxy, socializing only within their Chapters, purging their youthful passion, replacing it with the calm, icy demeanour of the mature Time Lord - they'd baulked at all of this with the cheerful, animated disdain, the arrogant single-mindedness of the young. Not only had they annoyed their elders and teachers, they'd startled and even scared their peers, who had outwardly despised them and inwardly admired and envied them for their courage and the fact that they were actually enjoying their lives. It had been extremely uncomfortable being bullied by the prefects and head students, who had somehow gotten old without ever having actually *been* young. Another reason to take off.

Worst of all, they'd each been an original, a nonpareil, a stand-out. For a bit of fun and mystery, they'd adopted sobriquets based on their personalities or their fields of study - Doctor, Master, Rani, Monk, Inquisitor, Lama, Keeper, Chief - and then used them for so long and to the exclusion of any other form of address, that people had almost come to forget they even *had* names. Theirs had been the ultimate social crime on Gallifrey, that of not being exactly like everyone else. A final reason to go.

However, if he'd known how much fun it would be, he wouldn't have hesitated. There's an excitement to not knowing what's going to happen, to taking life as it comes, to relying on your wits - to learning by doing rather than learning without ever doing anything at all.

There's also a thrill to playing hooky, to ditching all responsibilities and heading for the frontier. The Doctor, despite his occasional assaults on propriety, has always appeared - outwardly at least - to be the very model of an aspiring young Time Lord. His restlessness and rebellious streak were always very well concealed beneath his rather

formal manner, his imperiousness, his impatience with fools. He'd been expected to become at least a prefect himself, and he knows how dumbfounded, how disappointed and angry, his tutor was when he was discovered with the other, more obvious refractories. Up to then, no one had known about his true nature, his independence and tetchiness. But they've always been there, however well concealed.

Of course, that had all changed on *that* day. After that *nobody* had expected the best from him.

He's well quit of all that, out here on his own, seeing things for himself, making his own judgments instead of relying on the book knowledge acquired so long ago that none of his teachers can recall when it was gathered. Leaving behind the petty politics and not-so-petty games of intellectual dominance and submission that daunt people and level personalities, grade them like so many unwanted hills, until nothing is left but a flat, boring plain. Not for him, if he can help it.

He knows it can't last, and that there will be hell to pay when he returns to Gallifrey. They'll find him or he'll get into some kind of trouble he can't allay on his own. Or he'll start to get worried about everyone he's left behind, family and friends, and go back to them, regardless of the consequences. There will be a reckoning, and there's nothing he can do about that. Except stay away as long as he can.

As if he could get back at the moment even if he wanted to!

The ship doesn't seem to like him much, he has long since suspected. It's old and quirky, and maybe even a bit grumpy. Maybe it was getting ready to retire, and he came along and swiped it for one last jaunt around the cosmos. TARDISes have intelligence, of a sort, but it's such a radically different kind of intelligence that Time Lords can only commune emotionally with their time-and-space machines, not intellectually. Not that they haven't tried for something more direct; but, after aeons of fruitless endeavour toward that end, they've mostly given up.

This TARDIS definitely has a will of its own, a bent for the offbeat, the bizarre, the godforsaken corners of the universe that nobody ever heard of. The Doctor suspects that the TARDIS is bored with seeing what is already recorded in its database and prefers to go places that

have never been mapped. It's exhilarating, but also a bit nerve-wracking, to land on a place about which there is no information available. Still, when - if - he gets back, he'll be able to offer a huge store of knowledge the Time Lords don't currently possess. That might mitigate his crime. Might.

His reverie is interrupted by an unfamiliar sound. He searches among the many instruments on the Console for the source. Nothing is apparent. It's all so confusing! He's an energy chemist, not an engineer! His specialty is in fuel synthesis, not systems design and maintenance. He knows the theory of chronospatial navigation - the Vortex is infmite, it has no 'edges,' but gravity from Real Space can intrude - he must have 'wandered' too near a star or a nebula, drawing him near the Interface. He must regain control of his ship, establish a one-to-one mapping between the Vortex and Real Space. Otherwise, he could end up who-knows-where - and *when*?

The City was the Ship, and the Ship is now the City. It lies in a broad valley, sprawling its limbs toward the mountains on each side, snaking through a cleft toward the inland sea that is the nearest - and only - source of fresh water on this continent.

It's vast, even though only the Captains and the Lieutenants actually dwell within. Even their slaves must exit each night when the workday is done, except for a few on the overnight shift. And they go home at daybreak.

There are Orderlies and Warnsmen - guards - everywhere. The Captains trust no one; suspicion is a growth industry here. The Lieutenants are even more zealous, the officious little twits. Running hither and thither, as self-important as judges, sucking up to their superiors by trying to always look busy on some Vital Task. They're humourless busybodies, too, sticking their noses in everyone else's business; and there's no point in complaining. A Captain will back up a guilty Lieutenant over an innocent Anyone Else every time. Even another Captain's Lieutenant.

Orderlies on the entrances and exits, Orderlies at all the corridor junctions, Orderlies at every workstation, guards in every rec hall and mess hall and shopwalk and crosswalk and overpass and underpass

and vid terminal. Orderlies guarding the Orderlies, and more Orderlies guarding them. There should be no way in or out.

But there is. Koba isn't much of a thinker, by his own admission, but he's the ultimate doer. Give him a task and he'll get it done. He never fails.

This is the oldest route in, one taught to Koba by his father, who learned it from *his* father. Koba taught it to Jome, too, but Jome has had way too much on his mind to worry about following it on his own now. Amazing that it still exists, but just because there are more Orderlies and Warnsmen than there are workslaves doesn't mean they're any good at it. The net is by no means as seamless as the Captains and Lieutenants imagine it to be.

Jome clambers through the loose piece of metal pretending to be an impenetrable wall. Beyond is a dimly lit space, but it feels vast. There are obviously parts of what was the Ship that have been left to go fallow, unused for generations. Even the Orderlies never come to these ancient sections.

With good cause. There are dangers everywhere, broken glass, live wires trailing out into the air, broken deckplates, debris and rubble strewn as if by some large, careless hand. Koba knows the route by heart, though, and Jome follows him like a conjoined twin, hand in Koba's belt. They daren't risk a light, just in case some stray orderly is bucking for a promotion by being extra-vigilant.

But no, it's all in Koba's fervidly dour imagination. There's never anybody around here, hasn't been for as long as Koba can remember.

Koba leads Jome around a corner, down a ladder, through a narrow gangway, and past what was once a sealed hatchway but now gapes wide open. 'Okay,' he whispers. 'This is as far as I know. Where's this Trove?'

Jome orients himself in the dimness. 'This way - no, this way,' he points, before moving ahead slowly, cautiously. 'I haven't been here for years, since our father took us here when we were boys. Jor-Joram was the one who came here most of the time.' It is still hard for him to pronounce his dead brother's name.

Proceed in silence. Clamber over mounds of clutter, long disused

equipment, stuff Jome has never been able to figure out what it is. The Ship must once have been terribly advanced and sophisticated. Now it's just a gigantic pile of junk. Even the Captains and Lieutenants don't really know much about what's jumbled in the endless corridors and cabins.

They've arrived. A room, not big, not small. One wall taken up with a large array of buttons, dials, slots, ports, monitors, keyboards, and other apparatus. And a grille...

Jome sits down next to the wall. Speaks, slowly and distinctly, into the grille. 'This is Jome.'

A pleasant, soft voice answers. 'Hello, Jome. It's good to hear from you again.'

'You too, Doctor.'

The distant low, slow chime is beginning to get to him. He hasn't yet figured out where it is coming from, that muffled BONG -BONG, but it doesn't sound promising. One of these days, he thinks to himself, oh yes, one of these days, I shall really figure out where everything is and what it all does.

Right now is not a good time to worry about that.

A one-to-one mapping of the TARDIS' s pocket universe with the outer reality is proving harder to accomplish than it ever did in the simulator back on Gallifrey. Engineering and piloting are turning out to be dissimilar pursuits. Patience and imagination are all well and good, but confidence, boldness, and a steady hand on the tiller are also not without their proper place. Hmm, yes.

Okay, things are starting to look a bit less abnormal. The Doctor recalls a brief glance at one of the standard manuals on capsule operation. There was a screenshot depicting a Vortex translation gone wrong, followed by an outline of corrective steps. Trace the path fault. Isolate the last correct interface module. Input the distance from the last known reference point. Correct for gravitic drift based on the universal time clock. Pull the lever. Pray.

The scanner is showing a fuzzy wash of blurry white objects that just might be stars, if you're not too particular. Slowly resolving, slowly, slowly, clearer, clearer - there! Absolutely stars. Back in Real Space.

If only he could figure out exactly *where* in Real Space.

Nothing looks familiar. Not that he's seen every star there is, but he's seen more than a few. As best as he can figure out, he's far far away from where he thought he was going. And he didn't just blindly punch in some coordinates and push the button.

So what is he *doing* here?

Could the *TARDIS* be doing it?

And where did *that* thought come from?

The Doctor feels like he has just flubbed a line or something. His dignity at stake, everyone watching him, must reassert his authority. He scrutinizes the instruments, the readouts, trying to make some sense of the situation. Once again probing his memory for some even dim recollection of a manual, an instruction booklet, a lecture on TARDIS helmsmanship. Nothing comes to mind, and meanwhile, the ship continues to spiral downwards, downwards, down, down...just then, the Doctor notices the planet.

'I thought you said you couldn't work this thing,' Koba mutters.

'I can't. Only Joram really knew how to get information out of it.'

'But it's talking to you!'

'Yes, but that's just the first level. The real Trove is buried beneath passwords and riddles and nonsense.'

'Then what are we doing here?'

'Because I can get the Doctor to talk a little about what he's done. Not much, and some of it's hard to figure out exactly what he means. But he'll talk to me in very vague, general terms.'

'You needn't talk about my like I'm not here,' the 'Doctor' interjects.

The two rebels turn and stare at the blinking light just over the microphone grille. 'Sorry,' Jome says, a bit sheepishly.

'So,' Koba begins. 'You're the Doctor.'

'Not exactly. I'm a computer program utilizing the Doctor's voice and certain aspects of his personality,'

'How much of the Doctor's personality?'

'Enough.'

'Enough for what?'

'Enough to tell us who the Doctor is and what he does,' Jome breaks in, interrupting Koba's colloquy with the computer. 'You need to know, Koba. I didn't start all this lightly. I had reasons -we had reasons for believing in the Doctor so much.'

'I've always been flattered by the confidence you all seem to have in me. First Jome's father, and now the son.'

'With good reason, Doctor. How many planets have you saved?'

'I think it's going a bit far to say I've 'saved' any planets, Jome.'

'Don't be modest, Doctor. My father showed me the Trove. Joram - Joram spent hours and hours here reading through it. He couldn't count how many worlds you came to the rescue of. Including this one.'

Koba turns to Jome in surprise. 'I didn't know that.'

'The Captains refuse to teach it. Not even the Lieutenants know it. But a century ago, the Ship crashed here. Something terrible happened, and the Doctor came and saved everyone. He left a part of himself behind - the Trove - to keep watch over us. My father discovered it, learned the truth, and taught me. I taught - Joram.'

'Forgive me,' the Doctor interrupts. 'How *is* Joram? Where is he? It's been years since I last saw you here without him.'

'Joram's dead,' Jome barely spits out.

'Oh, I'm sorry. What happened?'

'We attacked. You didn't show. I mean - the *real* Doctor didn't show up. We were slaughtered.'

'Oh dear. That doesn't sound like me at all.'

'No. Doesn't, does it? I don't understand. Joram - he was *so sure!* Everything we read, everything you told us - the Doctor *always* arrives when he's needed.'

'Only this time, he didn't.'

'Right.'

'I don't know what to say. I'm certainly aware of my - of the *Doctor's* - proclivity to be where and when he's needed. Not that I understand how this is possible. The only explanation I can propose is that he was

unable to be here this time. I can't imagine that he would wilfully stay away when he could have been saving people.'

'This is a waste of time, Jome. We're needed back at the camps, rallying the people, preparing to defend ourselves. The Orderlies and Warnsmen aren't going to forget that we attacked them. We should be getting ready for their vengeance!'

'No, Koba! You have to understand! I didn't just charge into this blindly. I didn't just get Joram - and Terrin - and the rest -killed for *nothing*! The Doctor should have *been* here! You *have* to understand that!'

'I understand too well, Jome. You put your trust in him and he betrayed you. Betrayed all of us. Next time, we'll rely on ourselves, not some mythical figure who probably didn't do a tenth of what you think he did.'

'*No*!' Jome is practically shouting now, red in the face. 'It isn't like that! Tell him, Doctor!'

'I'm not sure what you want me to say, Jome. I'm not really the Doctor. I don't even play him on TV.'

'TV?'

'Sorry, ancient joke. I know you think the Doctor is flawless and perfect, incapable of error.'

'Hah!'

'Koba!'

'No, he's right to be sceptical, Jome. I may not be the Doctor, but I think and feel the way he did. At least, the way *my* Doctor did.'

'Sorry?'

'Urn - that's not important. *My* Doctor was vulnerable, capable of making mistakes, needing to rely on his companions. He got things wrong a lot, he didn't always know what was going on, he sometimes had to improvise and make things up as he went along. But he was always truly heroic, he never gave up, he always hoped for the best and would do anything for his friends and for the causes he believed in.'

'See, Koba? What did I tell you!'

'But Jome - *nobody* can *always* be where they're needed. I did warn you, when I started realizing what you had in mind, the way you and

your father and Joram were beginning to worship me - I mean, the Doctor. You've become dependent on him, Jome; he's become your talisman, your security blanket, your amulet, your charm. And I'm - he's - *none* of those things. He's just a *person*, Jome. Flawed, prone to errors, well-meaning but not capable simply of imposing his will on every situation.'

'No! Stop defending him! We needed him and he wasn't here! And Joram - Joram - Joram *died* because of him!'

At that moment, there is a noise outside the computer chamber. A faint vworping sound, followed by seconds of echoes. Then, sounds of footsteps, of clattering, of people knocking over metallic objects, of those objects clanking off a metallic floor. Loud voices, bullying, authoritarian voices.

'What the hell - ?' Koba whispers.

'Doctor -'

'I know, Jome. I'll disappear. Until the next time.' And all the lights on the computer wall go blank.

Koba creeps toward the doorway, Jome following close behind him. Koba peers barely through the opening, sees nothing, but they can both still here sounds. Down the passageway, to an intersection, mostly blocked by junk and clutter. Koba gestures to Jome to stay back. He advances, hugging the wall, practically disappearing into the dimness. Jome crouches in a shadow, trying to will himself invisible, heart pounding, wondering if the Captains have finally located this special, holy place. If they find the Trove, if they discover Jome's secret weapon, the source of all his hopes and dreams and plans!

Not that the weapon worked as he expected. Jome can *not* get his head around that. Every time, *every time* the Doctor has been needed somewhere, he has been there. But not this time. Why *not* for them? Why did the Doctor forsake *them*? Why did the Doctor forsake *him*? Is it - even *possible* - did he get things wrong? Maybe - maybe the Doctor was never *going* to come, maybe he really is just the myth that Koba has been calling him all along. Maybe - maybe he sacrificed everyone's lives - his own brother's life - for *nothing*.

Koba slithers back into the room. 'We gotta go!' he hiss-whispers.

He grabs Jome's arm, starts the drag him down the passageway away from where they heard sounds.

'What's going on?'

'Don't know. Buncha Orderlies and Warnsmen, trying to catch someone.'

Jome stops, resists Koba's tug. 'Catch someone? Catch who? Nobody ever comes in here but us.'

'I couldn't see. Some guy.'

Jome grips Koba's arm. 'What did he look like?'

'How should I know? Just some guy.'

Jome heads back towards the intersection.

'Jome!' Koba whispers loudly. 'Come back!'

'No! I think it may be the Doctor!'

Definitely a planet in the scanner, and not a very attractive one. Not a very distant one, either. No identification, no sensor readouts, just an ugly dark ball - getting closer and closer - and a sense that he is very far out in the universe, far from anyplace he would ever consider travelling to willingly.

Is the TARDIS going to crash? *Can* the TARDIS crash? How he should *he* know, he's piloting the thing only in the sense that he's the only living thing standing next to the Console.

Okay, the descent is slowing down...slowing...slowing...the TARDIS is hovering perhaps half a kilometre above the planet's surface, drifting slowly first in one direction, then in another. It's almost as if it's...looking for something? For what?

For *that*. In the distance, and splayed out beyond the very horizon, is a long, low structure, tubular, branching, modular...looks familiar...something about it...

It's a ship! Or, rather, it *was* a ship. Now it's a city, a metastasis, a proliferation of ship. Most of it appears built on the same plan - a longish metal cylinder, propped up on landing struts, connected by a hub to three other sections. Some of the sections end in blind stubs, others are links in chains that appear to stretch for kilometres. There are people walking around outside them, going up and down the ladders, peering out of doorways. None of them seem to notice the

TARDIS.

Once again, the Doctor gets the sense that the TARDIS is looking for something. He also begins to get a sharp sense that something - someone - is waiting down there for him. Someone he already knows...

Then, suddenly, the TARDIS is diving again, swooping down, circling over one particular segment of the endless city-ship, then bee-lining right for it. The jarring sound of materialization fills the Console Room, and there is an abrupt shudder and thud of translation back into the real universe. The Time Rotor stills to a halt. There is silence.

The scanner shows... nothing. There must not be any light outside.

Well. It's been fun, but suddenly, this adventure is turning serious. It never occurs to the Doctor to just try and leave. No, the TARDIS evidently had some kind of purpose in bringing him here, and if he wants to understand his craft and its personality (for want of a better word), he ought to fmd out what that purpose is. Plus, he can't shake the feeling that he already knows why he is here, that he is here to meet someone important. Someone familiar...

So, nothing to do but find out. The Doctor operates the door, exits into a dark space that feels cramped, confined. He fishes a small torch out of a pocket in his waistcoat, switches it on, flashes it about. Hard to get a full sense of where he is, but there is clutter all around, metallic objects that appear to be some kind of computer equipment or something similar. Long disused, apparently. Dusty, decrepit, neglected. Forgotten.

The Doctor starts to explore. He chooses a direction almost at random, except he is being guided by this vague feeling. It seems to be stronger in one direction, so that's where he goes. Carefully stepping over all the debris in his path. Warily treading through the passageways, stopping periodically to gauge what his heightened senses are telling him. Wondering just where in the multiverses he is.

Ahead! What's that? The Doctor shrinks against a wall, willing himself invisible. Doesn't work. There are men approaching, waving torches, stumbling over junk, cursing, shouting, making complete idiots of themselves. But even idiots can overcome genius - if there are enough of them.

There are enough of them. The Doctor dodges, hides behind

cabinets and boxes, runs them a merry chase. But in the end, all he is doing is delaying the inevitable - he's very good at that, by the way - and eventually, the inevitable is just that.

Well, there's a first time for everything, and if you're going to be frog-marched down a narrow corridor by a bunch of bullyboy guards, you might as well enjoy it.

But, at the same time, the Doctor thinks to himself, well, *this* can't be what the TARDIS brought me here for.

'The Doctor? Are you sure? How can you tell?'

'Who else would be here? We can't let them capture him! Come on!'

Throwing caution to the winds, Jome pounds down the passageway back towards where they heard the Orderlies and Warnsmen. At the doorway he pauses, then hurls himself into action.

Behind him, Koba is amazed at Jome's resolve. Also his strength. This is a side of the scholarly leader he hasn't seen before. There are only six Orderlies and Warnsmen. Two of them are standing alongside a man in strange dress - a black jacket of some sort, checked trousers, a white shirt - there's something familiar about him, even though Koba knows he's never seen the man before. He looks impassive, almost fierce, scrutinizing everything as if he is in command, despite his captive status.

Koba reflects on this with a speed that surpasses conscious thought, before he too is pitching into the enemy with a ferocity born of too many years of fighting for everything. Two of the Orderlies are down before they know they were falling, and another two follow almost immediately afterward.

Koba turns on the remaining two with a savage grin on his face. One of them flees, turns his tail and beats it, stumbling and crawling at light speed down the corridor. The other one isn't so lucky; he takes the full brunt of Koba's fury, his blind white hot rage at all the failures, all the defeats, all the deaths and funerals and empty homes, missing fathers, lost husbands, murdered children. *This* is for Spurns, and *this* is for Stoyl, *this* is for Blent, *this* is for Davrak -

'Stop!' a voice whispers, barely seeping through the blood rush in his head and the blood lust in his eyes. Koba wheels, fists poised, murder

in his gaze.

But it's just Jome. Koba dances a few more seconds, bobbing, weaving, fists waving, before he settles, down.

'I think you killed him,' Jome says wonderingly, staring at the Warnsman lying at Koba's feet. Behind him lies the remaining orderly, unconscious. There's a bruise on Jome's face and his right hand appears to be broken.

'That was unnecessary, young man,' says the stranger, a bit haughtily. 'Violence never serves any useful purpose.'

Jome and Koba stare at each other. The man doesn't sound like the Doctor they've heard speak out of the Trove, but there is nevertheless something about him. Something imperious, something almost magical.

The Doctor! This *is* the Doctor! It's him! He's actually here! After all these years of believing and hoping and dreaming, he's standing there, staring at them as if down from a great height. He almost wants to bend to one knee out of respect, as well as a sense of his own unworthiness.

And then... then he remembers. Remembers Jerrin and Terrin and Kilif and Breza and Spank and - and - and *Joram*. And all the rest this man betrayed, this man abandoned, this man did nothing to help even though they were all counting on him. And the awe vanishes, the reverence disappears, the respect dissolves, to be replaced by indignation, by rage, by a furious sense of injustice and a *personal* need to exact revenge.

'All right, Doctor,' Jome says through gritted teeth, 'now that we've rescued you, why don't you tell us where you've been before we kill you.'

The Doctor stares at the middle-aged man holding him. Then, gently and deftly, he separates himself from the rather shaky grip and takes a half-step back. Clutching his own lapels, trying, as always, to appear superior and in control, he surveys the situation, notes the grim, silent man behind his captor. He looks like a warrior.

These men know him. *How* is a question to be asked later? Undoubtedly, they know him. They appear to have been expecting him. And, unquestionably, they have indeed rescued him.

So why do they want to kill him? And what is this about telling them where he has been?

'We can't stay here, Jome,' the warrior says.

'We'll take him back to the Trove. If we're quiet, they won't find us there.'

'Let's go,' he orders the Doctor, scooping up a weapon from one of the fallen soldiers and levelling it at his captive.

The Doctor precedes, Jome in the middle, Koba, similarly armed with a salvaged weapon, bringing up the rear. In silence they make their way around and over more spilled pieces of archaic, unused, unusable equipment, down narrow dusty passageways, into a room dominated by a wall of blinking lights and whirring noises. And a speaker grille in the very middle.

Koba pulls up a wobbly chair. The Doctor sits, as if a prince assuming his throne. He appears calm, basilisk calm, as if barely taking notice of his surroundings.

Jobe wonders what to say. How can he possibly convey his fury, his sense of having been personally betrayed by this man he has wilfully worshipped his entire life? This man, this hero, this *legend* - this *fraud*, this traducer, this defalcator.

'Who are you?' the Doctor asks. 'And how do you know me?' His voice is quiet, but full of authority - even now, even after his monumental, shocking abdication, he is trying to maintain the facade of control, of omniscience and omnipotence.

'I was your biggest believer, Doctor.'

'My *what*?' Of all the answers he could have heard, this was perhaps among the last he might have expected.

'I believed in you, Doctor. Even when the others wavered in their faith, when they ridiculed me, when they asked for proof I didn't have and couldn't give them. *I* never gave up, *my* faith never faltered, Doctor.'

'Faith. In me? I don't understand.'

Jome is babbling now. 'Where *were* you, Doctor? Why didn't you *come*? I expected you to *come*, Doctor, I was *counting* on your arrival. Nobody believed me, I kept telling them, relax, he'll be here. And you

didn't *come*, Doctor, you didn't *come*. Why didn't you *come*? They slaughtered us, Doctor, they massacred us, and you could have stopped it, where were you? Where *were* you?'

The Doctor has become alarmed. This man is obviously on the verge of some sort of nervous collapse. His words make no sense. They were expecting me? To do *what*? 'I'm sorry, young man, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. Who are you? What is this place? Why did you expect me to come?'

The other man - Koba? - puts his hand on his fellow's shoulder. 'This planet no longer has a name, Doctor, but we've heard that a century ago, it was called Frontios.'

'Frontios? I've never heard of it.'

'But you will, Doctor,' says a voice from out of the air.

'Who said that?'

'I did, Doctor.'

'And who are you?'

'I'm *you*. Or, rather, I'm a digital personality matrix based on what you will someday become. Your future is my past, Doctor.'

Light slowly dawns. 'You claim to be a computer programme derived from the personality of one of my future incarnations?'

'I *am* a computer programme derived from the personality of one of your future incarnations. Your fifth incarnation, to be precise.'

'How is this possible? What are you doing here?'

'It's a long story, Doctor, and a complicated one. A century ago, your fifth persona landed on Frontios. The TARDIS was destroyed, shattered into billions of fragments by a creature with astonishingly strong powers of gravitation. To preserve itself, the TARDIS melded its memory circuits with the central processor of a colony ship that had itself crash-landed on Frontios some years before. The Doctor tricked this creature into reassembling the TARDIS and then defeated it. The TARDIS departed - leaving behind a hybrid memory inside the ship's computer. Me. Somehow, I developed a personality based on that of the Fifth Doctor. I lay dormant for many years, until an escaped slave discovered me. That slave was Joba's father. He introduced Joba and his brother Joram to me when they were small children. We spent

many hours over the years discussing things. Joram learned how to access my memories, which even I can't consciously do.'

'Yes, and he learned about you, Doctor, about all the great things you've done.'

'Absolute rubbish! I've never been here before! Fifth persona! Computers with personalities! Poppycock!'

'No, Doctor,' says Jome. It's the truth. It *has* to be the truth.'

'What 'great things' have I done, then? Hmm?' His stare transfixes Jome, who has to swallow and take a deep breath before responding.

'You helped the Klerids on Kleridus Two. You delivered the Ravidans on Ravidius Major.'

'I assure you I did no such things. I've never even *heard* of those planets, let alone been to them.'

The two men stare at each other intently, as if by sheer force of will one can force the other to admit he was lying.

Koba touches his leader's shoulder. 'This is getting us nowhere.'

Jome doesn't even look at his subordinate. He continues to stare at the Doctor, incomprehension writ large on his face. Slowly, he says, 'You are the Doctor.'

'Yes.'

'The *Doctor*!'

'I know my own name, young man. You say that like it *means* something to you. Like it should mean something to *me*.' Assuming *that* air of elderly superiority to his interlocutor, even though in appearance he seems scarcely older.

'You *save* people. You save *worlds*!'

'Do I? Not that I'm aware of.'

'Why are you *lying*? Why didn't you save *us*?'

'Hmmm. I gather that something awful happened here, something you people for some reason think I should have done something to avert. Instead of shouting things at me that I don't understand, why don't you simply tell me what is I'm supposed to have done that I didn't?'

Jome glares at the man in front of him. 'You're the Doctor.'

'You said that already. I don't deny it.'

'You save planets.'

'You said that too, but I'm not so clear on that one. The only thing I save at the moment are Quidditch cards.'

'...Quidditch?'

'It's a game...played on broomsticks? That's not important. Why don't you tell me why you're so angry?'

'I've studied you. I've spent *years* studying you.'

'I'm flattered. I had no idea. Is it just a course or is there a whole faculty devoted to me?'

Jome grits his teeth again. This isn't going at all like he expected. The man he studied should be apologetic at least, prostrate with grief at the worst.

'You fought the Daleks all over the galaxy. You conquered the Cybermen. You-'

'Ah. I'm beginning to get the picture. You clearly have me confused with some other 'Doctor.' The only Daleks I've ever seen were in a museum on Gallifrey. The Cybermen vanished aeons ago. Now, I've quite a lot to do, so if you'll excuse me, I think I'll just -'

'Sit down.' Jome points his blaster at the recalcitrant Doctor, who recognizes it for what it is and knows, incredibly primitive as it is, it is still dangerous enough to do some serious tissue damage. He sits down.

'As I said, I studied you. For years and years, I've studied you! I know everything about you, where you've been, what you've done, who you've saved. If you hadn't existed, if I hadn't *found out* you existed, I never would have done it!'

The Doctor leans forward, struck by the sincere catch in Jome's voice. 'Done what?' he asked, his voice very low.

'Rebelled against the Captains!'

'The who? No, never mind. What do I have to do with this again?'

'You're legendary across the galaxy!' He assumes an almost religious attitude and intones, "Whenever and wherever oppressed peoples struggle to be free, there shall come a man known only as the Doctor, who shall lead them to victory and freedom!' *You* - you're the Doctor.'

The Doctor feels dizzy all of a sudden. His head spins, his face is flushed, he can hear the blood rushing in his ears as his hearts beat at an advanced rate. 'This can't be - how can you know all this? I haven't travelled anywhere yet!'

'What are you saying, Doctor? What do you mean, you haven't travelled anywhere yet?'

'Do you know where I'm originally from?'

'No. Does it matter?'

'I'm from a planet called Gallifrey. I am a Time Lord.'

'So?'

'Time Lords do not get involved in the affairs of others. We sit back and watch.'

'*You* didn't. The legends make that quite clear. You get involved wherever you go. And you always save the day. Always. Joram - my brother - he was better than me at getting information out of the Trove. He could talk for hours about your adventures, your exploits, the worlds you saved, the tyrannies you overthrew.'

'I'd like to hear him for myself.'

No response. Strained silence. Jobe looks even more miserable, if that's possible.

Koba speaks up, 'Joram's dead. He was killed yesterday.'

'Killed when we attacked the Captains. Killed when you didn't show up as you were supposed to!' That hysterical tone creeping back into Jome's voice. The Doctor eyes him a bit nervously.

'*How* can I have been supposed to be here? Hmm? I left Gallifrey only last week, I haven't been *anywhere* yet. I admit, my intentions were to get involved in helping people fight evil and injustice, but I haven't actually *done* anything like that so far. And as for my saving planets and overthrowing tyrannies, I can only hope that I'm that successful in the future. But I assure you, I am not that man yet.'

Jobe looks even closer to collapse. No...no...it can't be...you *are* the Doctor! You were supposed to come! You always come right when you're needed! You're always there! It's in the Trove! Dates, places, wonderful, heroic things you did! You stopped the Cybermen from destroying Voga! You kept the Daleks from stealing parinnium on

Exillon! You saved the colonists on Exarius from the Interstellar Mining Corporation! You even rescued Frontios from the Gravis and the Tractators! And you were supposed to save us! I based all my plans on that! Where *were* you, Doctor, why didn't you save *us*?' Jobe is crying now, almost incoherent with grief and distraction. He has dropped his blaster; he isn't even focusing on the Doctor any more. He slumps to his knees; Koba lowers his weapon, too, to look after his leader.

The Doctor stares at both of them almost in disbelief. None of this makes sense, none of it. How can he have done all these things? How can one man save so many planets? How is it possible for him to always arrive just before he's needed? It's absurd, it's ridiculous - and yet, Jime is *so* sure, *so* morally certain. It isn't just a belief of his, it's an absolute bedrock part of his entire worldview, the way Gallifreyans take regeneration for granted.

'If I may,' the voice of the 'Fifth Doctor' suddenly pipes up, 'I think I can explain a little. After your fifth persona departed Frontios a century ago, the colony continued to develop. It went through periods of growth and stagnation. Mostly stagnation. This is not a very suitable planet for colonization. It's hard to grow food here, for one thing, and such resources as it possesses are difficult to extract and work. Eventually the colony began to spiral downward. The descendants of the ship's officers, to keep things going, gradually assumed more and more control. Everyone else became either underlings, or guards - the Orderlies and Warnsmen - or slaves. It was necessary to maintain order, but it became a cruel tyranny, devoted more to preserving the Captains' power than to benefiting the colony as a whole. Eventually, some of the slaves escaped and fled to the valley beyond the mountains. They've been battling the Captains ever since.

'After Jobe and Joram's father discovered me, and the database of the TARDIS's memory circuits - what they call the Trove - and learned of the Doctor's years of exploits, they fixated on him - on you - as their eventual saviour. The legend of the Doctor became their religion - many though not all of them believe in it whole -heartedly, that the Doctor will someday come and save them. It's the only thing that has kept them going, their absolute conviction that the Doctor will come. They spent

years planning the final attack on the Captains, and they were genuinely expecting you to show up on the day and do *something* to ensure victory.'

The Doctor has never heard anything so... so... well, there are no words to describe it. He is humbled; shamed by this revelation, even though he knows it is not *his* fault. Time Lords are briefed on temporal paradoxes, warned of their dangers, cautioned never to get involved with them. It seems he is perilously close to violating the First Law of Time on his very first solo sojourn into the wider universe that Gallifrey so devoutly wished to keep him from. Perhaps they were on to something...

'What do I do?' he asks, feeling almost foolish for soliciting advice from a - computer programme!

'You have to leave, Doctor. You shouldn't be here, and I shouldn't be telling you this. Go, before they return their attention to you.'

'I'll never find the TARDIS amidst all this clutter and in this labyrinth of a ship.'

'I still have my telepathic connection to your TARDIS, Doctor. I'll summon it here.'

'You can do that? *We* can do that?'

'*I* can. *You* can't, yet. As I recall, you knew almost nothing about your TARDIS back then.'

'I'm learning, I'm learning.'

'Careful, Doctor. You can't lie to *me*.'

The familiar vworp-vworp of the dematerialization circuit fills the small room, and a blue shape assumes its rectangular form - balanced precariously on top of some junk. Koba, preoccupied with the wretched, sobbing Jome, appears not to have noticed.

'Go, Doctor. Their belief in you is in the process of turning to anger. Men frustrated by their gods tend to be almost implacable in their wrath. You don't want to be here when that happens.'

'Thank you. I don't know what to make of all this, I can't begin to think how I can go on knowing all this.'

'Ah, yes. One last thing -'

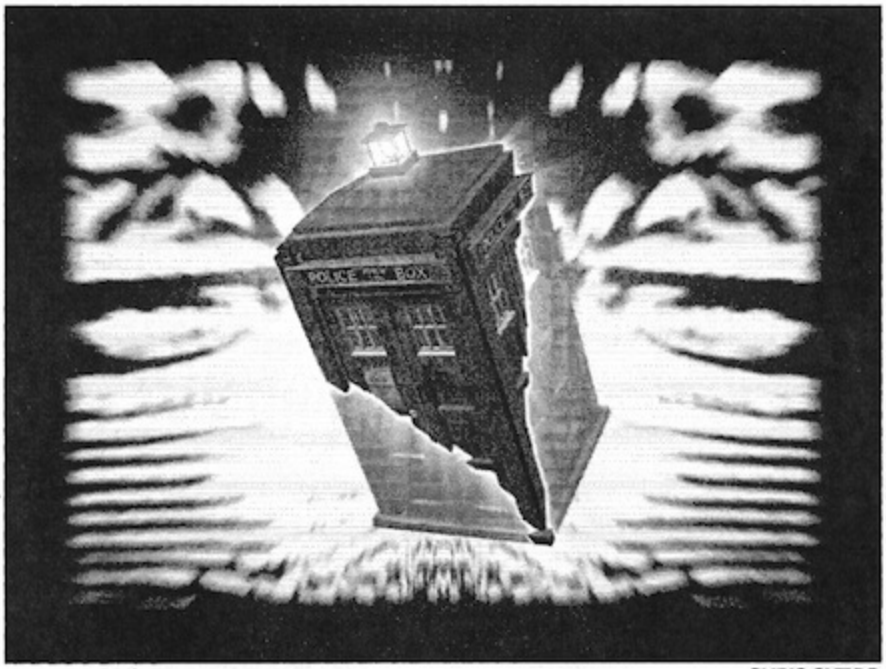
It shouldn't be able to do this, but there has been some kind of a

connection between the real Doctor and the virtual one ever since the TARDIS got close to Frontios. If the simulated Doctor could 'talk' to the TARDIS, even more it should be able to reach out and link with the Doctor, whose mind, after all, it shares, even if only in a simulated digital analogue. Reach out, touch - and erase. After all, if the Doctor knows what he will have done, he may not do it.

But then, how will he know when to get to all these places just before he's needed there?

Damn these temporal paradoxes! Much too difficult for this pair of Doctors to unravel.

Puzzled by what he is doing in this dark, cluttered room, the Doctor willingly enters his TARDIS and dematerialises as fast as he can. Wondering where he's been and what he was doing there. But, suddenly, eager to get on with the great adventure of exploring, discovering, learning - and helping.



CHRIS SUTOR

Left behind, the virtual Doctor reflects on what he knows will be his final communing with the TARDIS. The real Doctor's future is his own past, and when, many years in the future, he finally arrives on Frontios to set in motion the whole bizarre chain of events just concluded, he will long since have crumbled just like everything else around him. This colony is doomed, the Captains too, and when the power source goes, so will he. But he had that one moment of contact with the TARDIS, that one last brief moment of completion, of wholeness.

A Time Lord and his symbiotic TARDIS - there is no relationship in the cosmos that is closer, more meaningful, more totally unifying. Monozygotic twins don't share such a bond. A mother and her newborn are total strangers by comparison. Once experienced, it *must* be maintained. It *must*. Losing it is infinitely worse than going suddenly blind and deaf. It's like being enclosed forever in a chamber that is much too small for you and from which you know you will never be released. It is anguish and misery on a scale no human will ever know. The computerized 'Doctor' has had that one last moment of true, total bliss, and he has sacrificed it for the greater good, knowing what he knows. Oblivion cannot come too soon for him now. If a computer program can pray for death, this one will. This one does.

The Doctor has forgotten everything that just happened, and his bond with his pilfered time capsule has not yet richened and matured to the fullness that his virtual analogue knows he will never experience again. He putters along, trying to steer the ship with his inadequate knowledge, wondering where he is going and what awaits him when he gets there. For him, life is a mystery yet to unfold - and that is the most glorious thing he can possibly imagine. Nothing is known, all is possible.

But in that brief, nay, infinitesimal moment of contact with the virtual Doctor, the TARDIS got it. Got it all. Got *everything*. Everywhere, everywhen, everywhat.

There is information in that massive database that even Jome and Joram never discovered, in addition to what they did manage to read - dates, places, events. Planets. Peoples. Movements. Revolutions. Uprisings. Rebellions. Conquests. Villains, monsters, enemies. Friends, acquaintances, victims. Ideas, hopes, dreams, victories, defeats, tea parties, snipe hunts, dinner dances, ballet lessons. Heroism. Treachery. Chance. Life. Death. And everything in between.

Jome and Joram never got to see the whole collection.

But the TARDIS did.

And no way to tell the Doctor about any of it!

At least, not directly...

And in a picosecond of sudden, *stunning* self-realization, the TARDIS's biomorphic circuits self-alter - totally and permanently.

Irrevocably.

This particular TARDIS is still relatively young and unschooled. Its personality has still been forming, it hasn't decided yet what it wants to be when it grows up. It still isn't even sure if it actually *likes* the Time Lord who has so recently taken unauthorized possession of it. But now...now there is a purpose. A direction. Meaning. Now there is a mission - *his* mission. *Its* mission.

The Doctor has a lot of appointments in his date-book. Even if he doesn't know about them. But the TARDIS - the TARDIS knows...

Fathers, Friends, and Other Objects of Hate

Ian McIntire

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then, [...]
As to the legitimate: fine word, -legitimate!
Well, my legitimate, [...] I grow; I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

—King Lear, I.ii.1-22

Part 1: Fathers

'Do you realize what you've done?'

'Is that a rhetorical question, Lord President?'

The Time Lord had known that what he'd done would be considered highly risqué by most, but he had no idea that the disciplinary action would be this severe. The Lord President had bypassed stony indifference - standard deployment whenever calling someone onto the

carpet - and gone straight to a dewlap-shaking rage. That was not a good sign.

'YAAAAAAAAAH!' The woman on the operating table screamed in agony. For the fourth time that day, the doctor wished he had a better knowledge of human anatomy, or at least a pair of earplugs. The human woman's hands flexed in their restraints. Her face was flushed, and her birth canal was fully dilated. Where had his assistant gotten to?

The nurse rushed into the room, holding a textbook labelled 'Grey's Anatomy'.

'Is that it?' the doctor asked.

'I think so. It's the only one that the library had.'

The doctor cracked open the volume and began skimming through it, without even pausing to look at the cover.

The woman continued screaming as her child's head crested.

'A human woman! From Earth! Of all places, Earth! Dear Rassilon, what were you thinking? No! On second thought, I have *no* desire to know what you were thinking.' The Lord President had never been this angry. The Time Lord was afraid that the elderly official might trigger a regeneration. 'Something will have to be done.'

'Something?'

Feeling confident, the doctor closed the book. His gaze turned to the book's cover, and his eyes glazed over. 'You idiot!' he screamed. The nurse flinched slightly, but remained intent on guiding the infant from the mother's womb. 'This woman isn't a Grey, she's a human! Go back and get the right book.'

'Doctor, I think it's a little late for that. The child is almost completely out of the mother's body.'

The doctor threw up his hands and tried to find something productive to do. 'Oh well, I guess we'll just have to wing it.' He checked the woman's pulse. 'Rassilon! One of her hearts has stopped!'

'Don't humans have only one heart?' The nurse asked, trying to recall some of the information he'd learned in 'Biology of Lower Organisms', one of the electives he'd taken at the Academy.

The doctor considered for a moment, then said 'Oh, right.'

'We haven't decided yet.'

'Lord President, you can't mean...' Panic blossomed in the Time Lord's hearts. 'Something' could be anything, but it didn't sound too pleasant. His eyes lit up with fear, and his posture stiffened, as he finally made a genuine attempt to regard the President with the cowed respect that the stuffed shirt probably felt he deserved.

The Lord President held up a hand, silencing the man. 'I will hold my own council about what I can or cannot mean. You are in no position to make demands, or even requests. You've broken one of the most fundamental laws of our society, in what's probably the most disgusting and perverted manner possible.'

'Sir, if you'd only make an effort...'

The President snorted derisively. 'I'm aware of the efforts you yourself have made on your... sojourns. I have no intention of making any similar effort. And I must say, your attempts at facetiousness do not amuse me in the slightest.' He bent forward to press a button on his desk. 'Take him away. Get this degenerate out of my sight.'

A pair of Citadel Guards marched through the doors of the Presidential office, each grabbing one of the Time Lord's arms. Almost directly behind them came the nurse.

'Any news?' the Time Lord asked the nurse anxiously, practically ignoring the steel grip the guards had on his arms. It was odd. Throughout his time spent on Earth, he'd seen numerous specimens of the 'nervous father.' When he'd discovered that he had conceived a child, he promised himself that he would never behave in such an immature and utterly... *human* manner. But, when finally faced with the opportunity to show how much emotional control he had, all he could display were his own shortcomings.

'Twelve minutes ago, we delivered what appears to be a perfectly healthy, 100% Gallifreyan male infant.' The Time Lord sighed in relief. 'Oh, and the human has expired.'

Tiny fists beat at the air above them, as if they were expressing their owner's rage at the universe that stole his mother from him. Lungs

sucked in air and expelled it through freshly minted vocal cords.

Behind the sheet of glass, the Time Lord watched his son rage for a few moments, wishing he could enter the cleanroom and comfort him. His wife was dead. He knew nothing about what human children wanted or needed from their parents. Had the man been human, he would have been crying, but Time Lords don't cry - at least that's what he kept trying to tell himself.

A few meters down the hall, forty-five other infants screamed their own frustration at the universe as well. The Time Lord hated them. They were Loom-born, and would have all of the benefits that his son would be denied. The Council probably wouldn't even let his son...

He squeezed back tears, trying not to let his thoughts go down that path. Non-Loom conceptions were almost unheard of on Gallifrey, and were always terminated at the earliest possible time. And that rule was only for full-Gallifreyan foetuses. With a half-human....

Even if they let his son live, there was no way that he would ever be able to live a full life, not here. For those few sexually produced Gallifreyans who were actually brought to full term, there wasn't much that life could hold for them. While Gallifreyan law guaranteed full citizenship and rights to any child, regardless of their origin, the societal pressures were often too much for the 'Spawn of Pythia', as the Gallifreyan populace dubbed them. The average life expectancy for children born in such a manner was 20, with most of them taking their own lives much before that. 'Nature cleaning up its own mistakes,' a member of the High Council had once declared dispassionately.

The Time Lord punched the glass in front of him, and joined his son in screaming in frustration at his dead wife. *Why?! Why did you insist on coming back here?! Couldn't you have trusted me?* All that came out of his mouth was an anguished 'AIGH!' He collapsed to the ground, his forehead streaking down the pane of glass. His mind swarmed with memories of her, taunting him with the knowledge that memories were all he had now. The curve of her neck, the softness of her breast, the taste of her lips. Her confidence, her optimism, the musical sound of her laughter. Her faith in him.... She'd been the only person he'd ever met who'd been really and truly... alive.

They hadn't even let him see the body. They could never understand.

After what felt like hours, he stood up and looked at his son again. He wouldn't even be there to guide his son through Gallifreyan society. His attention drifted down to his right forearm as he peeled away the sterile dressing. He was tempted to peel even deeper, to rip away the scabs and let the fresh blue-black ink drip onto the antiseptic hospital floor. The ruling hadn't been formally handed down yet, but it seemed certain that the only thing in the Time Lord's future would be either dematerialization or Shada. Whatever identity he might have had was expunged. The line of alpha-numerics on his arm was all he was, now. If he was going to do anything for his son, it would have to be now or never.

It was then that the Time Lord realized that he hadn't seen a single nursery attendant since he entered. Today was Otherstide, the equivalent of a bank holiday, and so the attendants probably had the day off. Machinery attended to the infants' every need. Only a single child had its needs unfulfilled.

'Human children need to be cuddled. Hell, everyone needs a good cuddle now and then,' his wife's voice sounded in his mind, squeezing forth a fresh set of tears.

He opened the clean room doors, shocked at the noise that his young offspring was producing. Tentatively, he picked the child up, and the baby stopped crying soon afterwards. *Physical contact* he thought to himself. His son had dropped into a fitful sleep now, but the troubled expression remained on his tiny face. *I know*, the Time Lord thought. *I miss her too. Just like I'm going to miss you*. Fresh tears arose, and he held his son tighter to his chest. He looked down at the tiny circle of plastic that the attendants had placed around his son's ankle, and read:

XXXXXXX:	HALF-HUMAN
XXXXX:	HYBRID
Date of Generation:	Otherstide
Academic Designation:	Ekos
Gender:	Male

'Ekos.' The Time Lord and his wife had never come to a firm decision about what to name their baby, agreeing to wait until he was born and see what name suited the child. The attendants had apparently decided for them. 'Ekos' meant 'outsider', 'hybrid', 'stranger', and even 'rejected', in some parts of the planet. This was too much for a child to bear.

On a nearby table, the Time Lord found a pair of scissors, two blank plastic labels, and a marker. He gathered up the objects and put them in his pockets. Then he carried his son into the other room, the room that held the forty-five other infants.

After putting his son down on one of the tables in that room, he strolled to the closest cradle. *I know it's a lot to ask, little Cousin, but your* - he searched for the right terminology - *nephew - needs your help*. He used the marker to make a tag identical to the one on his son's ankle. The scissors snipped off the Loom-born child's label, and in its place, he affixed the forgery he had made. He took the snipped-off tag to the table that held his son and proceeded to copy the information from it onto another blank tag. He snipped off the tag that labelled his son as a hybrid, and affixed the second forgery onto his son's ankle. Then he switched the children, and returned the Loom-born to the cradle that had once held Ekos.

He returned to the Loom-born nursery and took one final look at his son, who would henceforth be known as:

Chapter:	Prydonian
House:	Lungbarrow
Date of Generation:	Otherstide
Academic Designation:	Theta Sigma
Gender:	Male

Then, the Time Lord disappeared.

Part 2: Friends

'Excuse me, is this seat taken?' The student paid no attention to the

speaker, having had a great deal of practice screening out the onslaught of his classmates' taunts. The tactic that the speaker had used was unfamiliar, and so the student hadn't yet been able to formulate a response. He'd just have to see how the insult progressed, and then think of something to use when next they used it.

'Hello? Can you hear me?' The speaker was persistent, the student gave him that. He made a good show of not looking at the speaker, showing that he was far beyond simply rolling over and letting them make fun of him. Silently, he tried to figure out who it was that was talking. The voice was male, and unfamiliar. Was one of his classmates somehow altering his voice? No. Why bother?

The student looked up casually, trying to make it appear that he was simply checking what the most recent busy work the instructor had assigned was. The speaker came into view, and the student received an interesting surprise. It was the new one, the one that the instructor had introduced to the class just this morning.

The rest of the class was all staring at the two of them, but it looked like they were more shocked than anticipatory. The new student was clearly not doing this at the behest of the rest of the class, but that didn't rule out anything. He didn't know much about the inner politics of the rest of the class, but this could easily have been some sort of initiation for the new arrival. Either that, or the newcomer had shocked the class by starting in on insulting him so soon.

He was still standing there, waiting for a response. Oh well. It didn't look like the speaker was going to finish his taunt without some sort of response from the student, so he thought *May as well give him one.*

'I can hear you.'

'Good. Is this seat taken?'

As if he needed to ask. T*hat seat is never taken, not by anything but a few papers that I may put there on occasion. No one is willing to sit anywhere near me*. 'No.'

'Might I sit there?'

Oh, just get it over with, for Rassilon's sake. He gestured toward the chair, coldly returning his attention to his work.

'Thank you. What's your name?'

Here it comes. Nothing to do but bite the bullet. 'Ekos.'

'Interesting name.' *No, really?* 'Unusual. I'm Theta Sigma. You can call me Thete.'

The insult never came. It took a while for Ekos to let his guard down, but eventually he realized that Thete had no intention of making fun of him.

'Theta Sigma, right?'

'Yes. Call me Thete.'

'Hi. I'm Gorb.'

'Nice to meet you, Gorb.' Gorb set his things down next to Thete and leaned forward expectantly. He started speaking a few times, but stopped when he realized that he was a little uncertain about what to say.

'Can I help you with anything?' asked Thete.

Gorb found his tongue. 'Look, Thete, I know that you're new here, so maybe you're not aware of one or two things.'

'Such as?'

'Well, you've been spending a lot of time with Washout...'

'Who?'

'Oh! Washout. That's what we call Ekos over there.' Gorb gestured to their half-human classmate, absorbed in his studies, on the opposite side of the room, and apparently oblivious to their conversation. 'Trust me, he's not long for the Academy. He's not fully Gallifreyan...'

Thete twisted in his chair and joined Gorb in staring at Ekos.

Using his peripheral vision, Ekos stared right back at Gorb and Thete. He'd spent a long time cultivating the ability to divide his attention in this manner, but he still wished he could hear what the pair was saying.

Every time he thought of that insufferable insect Gorb, he felt his temper flare a little higher. Gorb; orchestrator of all of Ekos' misery; ringleader of the rest of the class; the one who always laughed the longest and the hardest at the taunts that he and the other students heaped upon Ekos' back.

He watched as, smiling, Gorb began giving a long speech to Thete, punctuating it with long stretches of staring in Ekos' direction, and

gestures that brought familiar and painful memories to the forefront of Ekos' mind.

Sometimes, late at night, at times when Ekos' caretakers warned him he should be asleep, he'd lay awake, fantasizing about revenge against Gorb. He'd always make sure that the punishments he devised were just. Well, *relatively* just, at any rate. These were fantasies, after all. Simple punishments. Nothing that Gorb *didn't* deserve. And there wasn't much that Gorb didn't deserve.

Sometimes, even later at night, Ekos would fantasize that he *was* Gorb.

He returned his attentions to Thete. *Oh well, it was nice while it lasted*. Ekos believed that friendship wasn't really necessary. It might be nice, perhaps, but before Thete had come along, he'd survived his entire life without anyone who could be called a friend. It was only after he'd gotten to know Thete that he realized how nice friendship was. Ekos had someone to talk to, a peer. And now it was gone. It hurt. A lot. But it was different from the way that the insults from Gorb and the others hurt. Ekos knew pain intimately. Now he'd just been introduced to loss.

For a few instants, he contemplated screaming and running out of the classroom, running forever, running off Gallifrey itself had it been possible. He wanted to stand up and force his fist down Gorb's throat until the insect died the undignified death it deserved, and then repeat the action to the rest of his classmates. He wanted to do things that would have horrified the entirety of Gallifreyan society, and provided even more factual basis for the well-ingrained xenophobia that the inhabitants of his planet possessed. He wanted to do things that he couldn't even begin to conceive. He wanted to do everything. He wanted to do anything.

But he didn't. He simply sat in his seat and continued with his work. Anyone paying any attention to him might have noticed a slight tremor pass through the young boy's body, but that was all.

When his vision cleared, he watched Thete make a final comment to Gorb, stand up, and walk towards his seat. He didn't want to think about what his former friend might say. Best to just get it over with.

Thete plopped into his usual seat next to Ekos and smiled. 'Gorb tells me you're half-human.' At the front of the classroom, the instructor continued his lecture on Induced Coterminous Regeneration, but Ekos wasn't paying attention.

Doesn't waste any time, does he? 'Yup.'

'Hmm,' Thete said with a hint of curiosity. 'What's it like?'

What? No expressions of horror or disgust? No verbal abuse? Ekos allowed a tiny branch of hope to sprout. 'So - it doesn't make a difference? In our friendship, I mean.'

Thete was taken aback. 'No. Why should it make a difference?'

Had Ekos been anything but 100% Gallifreyan, he would have thrown his arms around Thete and cried tears of joy, but as it was, all he did was smile.

1. Select an inhabited, non-gallifreyan planet.
2. Prepare a 20-30 page report on that planet, which should include information on said planet's history, physical composition, dominant life form, culture and any other interesting details.
3. Present your findings to the class in a ten-minute oral presentation.

'Any ideas?' Thete asked Ekos.

'Nothing worth pursuing. At least not yet.' Ekos was staring at the multiversal atlas sitting in front of him, idly flipping through pages and trying to find an interesting planet. 'How about Tersurus?'

Thete, laying on the ground of the common room of Lungbarrow, tore his gaze away from the ceiling. 'Aren't we supposed to do a non-Gallifreyan one?' He propped himself up on the backs of his elbows and looked at his friend.

'Tersurus isn't Gallifreyan. Well, not for the most part, anyway.'

'Maybe not, but try telling that to one of the instructors. Especially if you submit the report.' Thete was right. The instructors were always looking for reasons to give him lower grades. He'd told himself that it didn't matter, it didn't hurt anymore; that even with the bias against him, he could still get passing grades. He was half right. Still, doing a report

on Tersurus would be tempting fate a little.

'I guess you're right.' Ekos returned his attention to the atlas, while Thete stared at the ceiling. 'So how about you? Have you thought of any planet to do?'

'It's not fair.'

'What?'

'The way everyone treats you. The kids make fun of you, the instructors yell at you for no real reason. Just because you came out of a person instead of a big clunky machine.'

'There's no use thinking about it. What planet are you going to do?'

'It makes me want to do things. Thinking about it makes me feel something.'

'Something?' Ekos abandoned his atlas and turned to the atlas, while Thete stared at the ceiling.

'I see them treating you really badly, and I just get all this... energy. I want to jump up out of my seat and yell at them, or at least make them see that what they're doing is wrong. Don't you ever feel like that?'

Ekos smirked. 'You're angry.'

'Angry? What's that?'

He hopped over the chair he was sitting on and joined his friend on the ground. 'Angry. The state of feeling anger. Before I went to the Academy, my caretakers made me study humans so I'd be able to know what I was like. They get these things called emotions. Basically, when certain situations arise in the daily lives of humans, their mindsets get temporarily altered by evolutionary triggers. It's a little like telepathic control, only the controller isn't another person, but the human's own deeper psyche.'

Thete watched his friend, his eyes wide open with fascination. 'Wow! And this 'anger' is that emotion?'

Ekos was a little uncomfortable about talking about this. He looked around, to make sure that Satthralope or Lungbarrow's Housekeeper wasn't in earshot. If they heard him talking like this, they probably wouldn't allow him to visit with Thete anymore. Ekos could recall a conversation that he'd overheard once. 'Wormhole's enough of a handful without that hybrid coming over and corrupting him' one of Thete's older cousins had said.

Oh, what the hell Ekos thought. 'Well, there's a whole bunch of emotions. There's anger, which I guess you've felt. That's the extreme dissatisfaction with a set of circumstances, sometimes coupled with a desire to change said circumstances. There's others, too. Sadness, love, joy, contentment, fear; a whole bunch of them.' Thete's jaw hung open. 'It's not that unusual, Thete. Apparently, full-blooded Gallifreyans get them too, it's just that they're too subtle to be noticed.'

Thete's eyes were each as wide as Pazithi Gallifreya. 'WOW! Have you ever felt any of these emotions?'

Ekos thought for a second. 'I used to feel anger. I think I may have once felt sad. Maybe some others, too. Nowadays, though, I only notice two particular ones.'

'Which ones?'

'Pain and...'

'Pain's not an emotion. It's a physical state, not a mental one.'

'No, you can have emotional pain, too. Trust me.'

'Okay, sorry. What else.'

'Hate.'

'What about Earth?' Thee said several minutes later.

'What *about* Earth?' Ekos was a little defensive when it came to his mother's home planet, and rightly so. It had been the butt of countless of Gorb's jokes.

'Why not do Earth for your planet assignment? Everyone is always making a big deal about how disparate Earth and Gallifrey are, so why not take the opportunity to sort of rub it right back in their faces?'

'Yeah, and let them rub right back in my face for the next month and a half? I don't think so.'

'Well, if you're not going to use it, I will.' Thete bolted up to a standing position, and loudly proclaimed 'To the Library!' He dashed into the corridor, probably heading for the Lungbarrow's exterior door. Ekos got to his feet and followed reluctantly.

A pile of books lay strewn across the table in front of Thete. It had taken Ekos fifteen minutes of wandering through the Library to find his friend. He glanced down at some of the titles.

Riverside Shakespeare, The Lorax, A Brief History of Time, Winnie the Pooh, and *Rand McNally's* to name just a few. Thete was engrossed in his studies, so Ekos picked up the closest book and read it.

'That's a treatise on ecological conservation,' Thete said, not looking up from his work. 'Quite good. I'm trying to find other books by this 'Doctor Seuss'.'

'His first name is 'Doctor'? Sounds odd.'

'I don't know. I like it somewhat. Doctor. 'Hello, I'm Doctor'.'

'I think it's a title, not a name.'

'Okay. 'I'm *the* Doctor, and this is my friend Ekos'.' Thete laughed. Ekos didn't.

For a few hours, Ekos and Thete poured through the material together. As the outside sky began to darken, Ekos finally said. 'Come on, we'd better be getting home. Let's check all these books out.'

'Can't.'

'Sure you can. Don't worry, I'll help you carry them all home.'

'Nope. Can't.'

'Why not?'

Thete sighed, and for the first time in hours, turned to face his friend. 'Because officially, they don't exist.'

Ekos' jaw dropped. 'You mean they're...' He looked around, worried that a librarian might see him. '*Banned?*'

Thete smiled. 'Yup. All the Earth fiction is banned. I wanted to spice up my report.'

'Thete! What in Rassilon's name possessed you to take them?'

'If they hadn't wanted me to read them, they should have put them somewhere where I couldn't have found them.'

'Put them back now, before we get caught!'

Thete saw the urgency in Ekos' manner. 'Alright,' he finally conceded. 'I'll stick to the non-fiction from now on. At least for my report.'

The two boys managed to secret the books back in their proper positions, and they went home safely, if a little jumpy.

But that night, Thete went to sleep with a copy of *Lord of the Rings*

under his pillow. The next night, it was under Ekos'.

In the year or so that followed, the two friends had a great deal of what humans called 'fun.' Once in a while, they'd skip classes to paddle canoes across Gallifrey's only major lake. They once managed to electrify Borusa's perigosto stick, a practical joke which went over well with the rest of the class - even if they never did find out who was behind it. Thete continued to 'borrow' more and more banned books from the Library, and the two of them spent a great deal of time reading them together. *Bunnicula* was Ekos' favourite, while Thete preferred *Treasure Island.*

It was about this time that Gallifreyan authorities managed to apprehend Ekos' father and bring him to justice...

Part 3: Hate

'I can't say I like the decor in here. Very stark and authoritarian.' The Time Lord raised his palms in a conciliatory gesture. 'Of course, I imagine that's what you were going for, and you've certainly achieved your goal in spades. Just not my style, I guess. I prefer lots of open spaces, but that's just me.' The guard remained impassive.

'I certainly give you full marks for the sense of isolation, but where's the menace? If the architect of this place had been really doing his job, I'd be scared witless wondering what's going to happen to me right now. But as it is, all I am is bored.' Still no response from the guard. 'Bored bored bored bored bored bored bored. Bored. Don't *you* get bored just standing there? Isn't there somewhere you'd rather be? I don't know, perhaps providing standard security for one of the marketplaces? Or at least a library or museum. I mean, the only real difference I can see between our situations right now is that you're getting paid.' Still no response. The Time Lord sank onto the only piece of furniture that the cell possessed, a simple bunk/bench. 'You *are* getting paid... aren't you?

'At least I can sit down. Perhaps you'd like a chair? Some sort of bar stool maybe?' The guard just continued his statue imitation. The Time Lord blew air through his lips in frustration and boredom.

'The lifecycle of the flutterwing...' - the instructor paused for what she intended to be dramatic effect, but what the students interpreted as absent-mindedness - '…is one of the most fascinating subjects in the infinite realm of Gallifreyan knowledge.'

A piece of paper was passed into Thete's field of vision. Written on it was 'So where did you get the epoxy from?' Thete turned his gaze toward Ekos and gave his friend a conspiratorial smile.

'By now, I assume you're all familiar with the so-called 'Flutterwing Effect,' in which...' The instructor was cut off by a pair of sharp raps at the classroom door. She turned towards the door, and opened it, preparing to give whoever was on the other side a stern remonstration in retribution for interrupting her.

It was a Capitol guard. The mood in the classroom abruptly chilled.

The guard strode towards the instructor's lectern, and whispered something in her ear. All of the students held their breath as the instructor craned her neck searching for one particular student, eventually resting her gaze upon the area where Thete and Ekos were sitting. She extended a single twig-like finger and pointed directly at them. The rest of the class let out a collective sigh of relief, and Gorb even managed a wry grin.

'How could they have found out?' Ekos asked out of the corner of his mouth.

'I don't know,' Thete replied. 'But don't worry, they'll only want to talk to me. There's no way they could know you were involved. I'll just...' Thete trailed off as the guard stopped right in front of their desks.

Thete stood up and closed his eyes, ready to feel the guard's statue-like grip on his shoulder, propelling him down the stairs, out the classroom doors and eventually to the closest guard depot (wherever that might be). His imagination was so vivid that it was about 20 seconds before he realized that the guard hadn't done any of this. He opened his eyes just in time to see Ekos shoved out the door, being taken away to face whatever music was waiting for him.

He looked around at his classmates, who had now turned to look at him.

'Theta Sigma, please have a seat so we may continue the lesson.'

'Don't we have any clearer security monitors?' the old ex-president asked. He reached out a claw-like hand and knocked it against the screen in front of him in a vain attempt to remove the lines of interference. The static was evidently competing with the president in the field of stubbornness, and continued its intensity.

'Sir, this is the best we can do. I suggest you simply watch the encounter. We should be able to get all the information we need using this method, and if not, we can always use the mind probe later,' the technician standing in the corner reminded the man.

The ex-president grumbled, but eventually returned to his seat. The monitor, perhaps mirroring the old Time Lord, contented itself with a line or two of interference at the bottom of the screen.

The image on the screen showed the cell in which the fugitive Time Lord languished, his eyes closed in what might have been sleep. The ex-president smiled vindictively at the fact that the deviant had been recaptured, and would finally get the punishment he so richly deserved.

'Sir? The...' The officer in the doorway had just received a communication from the guard on site and was now searching his vocabulary for an unfamiliar term. 'Offspring... is now in position.'

The old Time Lord frowned. He was a bit uncomfortable using the child, but after all, it wasn't as if he were a full Gallifreyan. If the boy's sensibilities got a bit bruised... well, you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs. In any case, they'd only let the little reject survive because of his prospective usefulness if they'd ever recaptured the fugitive... something they'd just done. They wouldn't need the child at all, now.

The old Time Lord pondered the idea of killing the child after the interview, but in the end decided against it. No need to be gratuitously cruel. 'Send him in, and let him meet his father.' The guard whispered into his communicator, and on the monitor, the exterior door of the jail slid open.

The boy, Ekos, was marched through the door followed by a guard. The prisoner opened his eyes, confused at the sight of what he believed - at least for a moment - to be another prisoner.

The guard performed a smart about face and exited the cell, leaving

the boy and his father to bond in relative privacy. The prisoner stared at the boy, as the pieces came together in his mind. The boy returned his gaze with equal curiosity.

'You're...' Ekos found himself unable to complete the thought.

'Ekos?' The prisoner asked cautiously. 'Is that you?'

'You're my father?' Ekos had no idea what to call the emotions that were bubbling up inside him.

'I suppose I... am. I didn't know they'd let... me see you.' The prisoner's mind was reeling. They had let him survive? The child he'd switched with his son at birth was still alive? It had been heart-wrenching to sacrifice another infant for the sake of his son - particularly one that would have been one of his Housemates - but now, confronted with the child he'd sentenced to a lifetime of second-class citizenship for the sake of his son, guilt long concealed behind mental blocks was flooding into his soul.

'You're the deviant?' The child's tone had become harsher. 'You abandoned me before I was even born, and let everyone on this planet treat me like dirt!' His face was reddening with fury, and the prisoner was glad for the force shield that separated him from the boy. 'You degenerate! How dare you!'

'I didn't do it! You're not my son!' As soon as he'd said it, the prisoner knew it was a mistake. In the observation lounge, the ex-president leaned forward, fascinated.

Ekos stopped his rage, and mirrored the ex-president's interest. 'What did you say?'

'You're... you're,' the prisoner scrambled for something to say. 'You're an impostor, here to put me off my guard. They killed my son - I'm sure of it!'

'No. If you'd seen what I'd been put through, you'd never say that. I'm your son, and I've been put through the hell to prove it.'

'No! I thought they would have killed you!'

Ekos screamed his anger at the prisoner, and fell against the force shield, beating his fists against it. It burned his flesh, and the prisoner could smell the stench of scorched skin from inside the cell. A squad of guards rushed in and pulled the boy from the barrier, holding him back as still he attempted to attack the man who he thought was his father.

'He's keeping something back. If he had really believed that we would kill the boy, he would have tried to stop it somehow. Prepare the mind probe.' the ex-president commanded.

The Time Lord had been to a great many places across the universe. He had learned many techniques that increased mental resistance. He had done a great deal that Gallifrey-bound Time Lords thought impossible.

But it wasn't enough to hide his secrets from the mind probe. Everything he knew was, in time, known by the ex-president. Some of what the ex-president discovered, he shared with Ekos.

Class was over for the day, but Thete still stood outside the school, waiting for the guards to return with his friend. He'd initially thought that they'd taken him back home, but after a quick conversation with Ekos' caretaker, (and the quicker the better, as far as Thete was concerned) Thete had discovered that Ekos had asked to be brought back here. He still hadn't arrived, though.

Across the grounds, a small group of students enjoyed a surreptitious meal of junk food. The smell of clusterbread and quickfish mingled with the braying of Gorb and wafted across the courtyard, assaulting two of Thete's senses. The only things that inspired that much amusement in the young lout were jokes regarding Ekos' pedigree, or Thete's friendship with the hybrid.

Thete looked sidelong at the clique, realizing that their snack was only a convenient diversion, to shield the actions of one of their number. Drax was almost out of sight, squatting on the ground in front of the Academy wall, a can of spray paint in his hand. A remarkably poor caricature of Ekos was springing to life, a derogatory statement having already been scrawled in as a caption. Thete sighed, wondering when they'd get bored with what they were doing.

An aircar swooped down from the sky, coming to a gentle rest in front of the academy. From it emerged Ekos and a single Chancellery guard. Thete frowned. Although the guard was treating him with kid gloves, Ekos' face was painted with a haunted look, as though he'd aged ten years in a single afternoon. Thete mentally reviewed all the

pranks they pulled, wondering what it could have been that would have landed Ekos in this much trouble. His mind came up blank.

'Here you are, young man,' the guard - whose nametag identified him as Ordred - said. He stood at attention, a bit at a loss for what to do next. Thete, for his part, didn't want to say anything in front of Ordred, in case it got either of them in any more trouble. He tried to shoot a heartening glance at Ekos, but Ekos, in return gave him... nothing. Instead, his gaze wandered to Gorb's group by the wall. He turned to Ordred and asked, 'Officer, should they be doing that?' Ordred looked at the wall, spied Drax, and shouted 'Hey, stop that!' Drax was off like a shot, dropping his graffiti implements and fleeing across the courtyard. Ordred released Ekos, and took off after the delinquent, huffing all the way. The rest of Gorb's entourage watched the proceedings with a great deal of amusement.

'Well, that got rid of him. Is everything okay, Ekos?' Thete waited for a reply, but none was forthcoming. Instead, Ekos strode forward, his face stony. Finally, he planted his feet and punched Thete in the face with all the fury he could muster.

Thete crumpled to the ground, more out of shock than pain. Ekos narrowed his hand into a stiffened spear of bone and flesh, and used it to strike at Thete in the nerve cluster nestled between his chest and left shoulder. According to some of the more lurid fictions they'd read, such a blow - if done correctly - could kill a Gallifreyan. But Ekos was inexperienced, and Thete wasn't a full Gallifreyan. All it did was cause Thete immense agony, and he screamed like an infant.

The scream drew the attention of Gorb and his retinue, and they abandoned their observation of the cat-and-mouse game Drax and Ordred were playing.

Ekos' fingers curved into claws, and the young Gallifreyan straddled his friend and tried to gouge Thete's eyes out. Thete was lucky enough to counter with his own hands, stopping Ekos about two inches from his face. Ekos, still wearing his cold expression, redoubled his efforts, and to Thete's horror, began gaining ground. The fingers came closer, closer, closer...

Gorb barrelled into Ekos, knocking the boy off his intended victim. When Thete got his bearings again, three of Gorb's friends were

holding Ekos down, while Gorb himself was landing blow after blow against him. All through this, Ekos' impassive gaze was fixed on Thete.

Thete heard Ordred give an exclamation of surprise from the courtyard. It was obvious to all concerned that the constable had decided to abandon his tiring pursuit of Drax, in favour of stopping the newly-undertaken fight. He looked at Gorb's expression shift as the bully wrapped his arms around Ekos' throat, and realized that Gorb had just decided to kill Ekos. Then he looked back' to Ekos, and realized that his former friend had made the same decision about Thete, probably while he was still in the car with Ordred.

Gorb shifted his grip, and with a single, sickeningly quick motion - 'NO!' shouted Thete. It didn't give Gorb much pause, but it was enough for Ordred to reach the group and pull Gorb off Ekos. The officer began scolding the students, and asking for explanations, but Thete didn't hear any of it. His eyes were still locked with Ekos'. And Ekos still stared back at Thete, with a glare that seemed to say, 'Not today. But someday. I swear.'

Quences and Satthralope had a long talk with Thete that night. Most of it concerned information that, Thete realized, Ekos had discovered earlier that day.

The next day at school, Thete arrived to find Ekos sitting in the seat previously occupied by Gorb. Gorb himself had been suspended, and there was some question as to whether he'd ever return to the Academy. Drax was evidently filling Gorb's place in the hierarchy, at least temporarily. The budding artist sat next to Ekos, slapping him on the back heartily and laughing as though they were old friends. The rest of Gorb's friends followed Drax's lead, maybe a little more cautiously.

Ekos had noticed Thete the moment he walked in the classroom, and for a moment, Thete worried that his former friend would attack him again. Ekos didn't, but his mask-like face didn't slip for an instant. Gradually, Drax's conversation trailed off as the rest of the students realized Thete was there. Of all the improbabilities in the universe, a classroom filled with students and silence - yet lacking an instructor - is

number 15 on the Unlikelihood List. But there it was.

Thete simply turned away, and returned to the corner in which he and Ekos had spent so much of their time. He heard whispering coming from the rest of the students, whispering eventually punctured by a series of cruel giggles.

So I'm alone. Just me against the world. So what is there left for me? What was it that Ekos once said he felt? Pain and hate? Would it be easier to let myself wind up like him, and let the bitterness take over? For a few moments, Thete wondered that. No. I won't let that happen. I'll fight back against it, and do my best to never inflict it on anyone else. There are corners of this universe that have bred the most horrible things. They must be fought.

Thete sat up straight in his chair, and let another, louder wave of giggles wash over him. The instructor entered, and the day's lessons began.

Ekos opened his lesson book, lost in his own thoughts. *Pain and hate. No longer. I will feel no more pain. And as for my hate... well. I am master of my own hate. And it will serve me well.*

Epilogue: Other Objects

Thete had been walking for hours, and still wasn't quite sure that he was going in the right direction. The citadel had dropped under the horizon a long time ago, and now the only evidence Thete could find that it still existed at all was a burnt orange smear of light pollution coming from the horizon behind him.

'Hello,' said a cheery voice from a few meters ahead of him. He looked towards its source, but saw only a pair of feet sticking up from behind a hill. As he drew nearer, he saw that the Time Lord was reclining in the small plants that grew wild in this region of the planet. Grass, he seemed to remember the plants being called.

'Well, here I am. I'm not sure why I came, but I did. So what's the big mystery? Who are you?' Thete waited for a response from the older man, but none was forthcoming. All he did was pat the grass next to him, clearly an invitation to Thete to have a seat.

Thete grumbled, but sat down anyway. 'No no no no no no no. Don't just sit. Lie back. Look at the *sky*...' The man managed to draw the last word into at least four syllables.

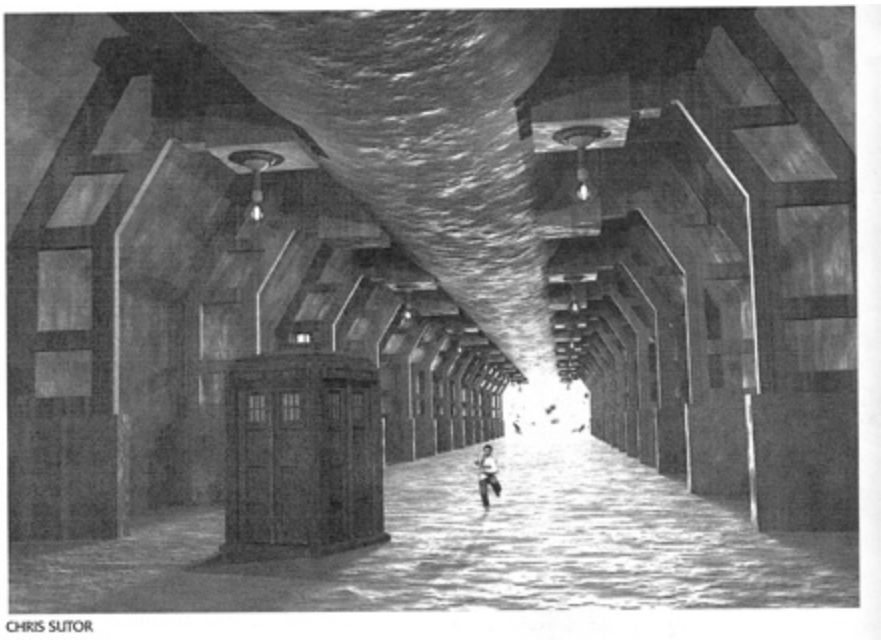
Thete obliged, and was rewarded with a gorgeous sight. A meteor storm. The sky above them was dancing with light. Purple, green, brilliant yellow.

'I suppose I asked you to come out here because I wanted to give you this. It was your mother's.'

The Time Lord handed Thete a small object. The boy examined it, realizing that it was a piece of jewellery. A ring, with a delicate blue stone set in it. Thete examined it for quite some time, getting lost in the universe it held inside its depths. 'It's beautiful,' he said.

'But I still don't know who you are. Why you...' Thete trailed off, looking up and realizing that he was alone. All that was left of the man that had called him out here was two footprints.

The sky continued its light show, as if beckoning him.



CHRIS SUTOR

Aspects of Evil

Part Two: The End of Days

CRAIG HINTON

The Doctor sighed and closed his eyes. He had remembered. And now he finally *understood*.

Enlightenment had found his greatest fears and discarded them. And then it had found his greatest desires, his greatest needs, and drawn them from him, encapsulated them, raised them to the next power.

Morality. Justice. Ethics.

For *everyone.*

It took no time at all.

It took all the time in the world.

The Doctor died, his frail body slumping across the bench, a smile on his face. A universe would mourn his passing - countless friends, countless enemies, would dread the thought of a universe without the Doctor. It hardly bore thinking about!

But there was life in the shadow of death - new life, yet eternally old. The Doctor was born, born for the third and final time. In many ways, he was no longer the Doctor. And yet he was also the very quintessence of the Doctor, spun into a new form.

A new form, and a new name. But also a very old name...

His impressive form cloaked in the brightest scarlet, he embodied all that was good about the Doctor. His ethics, his desire for justice and morality. And now that he truly understood, he realised that all of this was meant to be. It was always meant to be.

Every universe had Time Lords. And every race of Time Lords had a renegade, an Other, whose genetic heritage stretched back and forwards across eternity, moving and evolving from universe to universe, but always the same. The Other. Always destined to become all that he could be, all that he desired to be, always returning to the

beginning to start the cycle all over again.

The Ruby Guardian of Justice and Morality turned to his brethren, proud to know that he had completed the Six-Fold God.

Again.

COME, he said. WE HAVE MUCH WORK TO DO.

As Black, White and Red faded out of existence, all was momentarily still and silent in the Rose Garden, save the quiet buzzing of the bees and the wind rustling through the trees.

A universe without the Doctor. How would it cope?

But others were more than ready to take up the standard, prepared to assume the role of Time's Champion and save that sad and sorry universe from itself. The sound of the wind and the bees was momentarily drowned out by the raucous wheezing and groaning of a resolute blue box, its light blazing. The TARDIS was free. With the death of its owner, its friend, its partner, it was emancipated. Released from slavery, it knew that it had debt to repay. And it knew how to achieve it.

Seconds before it completely vanished, the TARDIS's chameleon circuit flared into life, not so damaged as it had appeared. The Metropolitan Police Box blurred and melted, changing...

A tall blonde-haired woman with an imperious gaze glanced around the Rose Garden, pleased at what she saw. An exact replica of the Other's estate on Ancient Gallifrey. Which had become the Doctor's estate. And which was now hers. But she would never return to the Rose Garden - she no longer had need for it. All that the Rose Garden offered, all that it promised, was within her, and would stay within her for the rest of her days.

Now that she was the Doctor.

Recreated to carry on the fight, she embodied all that she had learnt over the millennia, and was more than ready to take on the universe - whether the universe liked it or not. With a respectful nod towards the Guardians, she set out to face that universe, running an elegantly manicured hand through her hair as her form faded.

As a new Time's Champion dematerialised, a stronger wind immediately sprang up, whistling through the trees and bending the

roses, sending the bees scurrying back to their hives. It grew stronger, then stronger still, knocking over the statues, snapping the branches of the topiaried hedges. The gazebo virtually exploded, while the stream was whipped up into a tidal wave. It was if the hand of God were swatting the place away, eager to start again.

It took scant minutes for the hurricane to abate, but that was time enough for the Rose Garden to have been reduced to nothing more than a small, darkened room. A small, darkened room with roundelled walls.

A small, darkened room in the depths of a machine that had defied the death of its master. A room that could assume infinite form and complexity, such as a Rose Garden where it was always late afternoon - always ten to three. And where there was always honey still for tea.

The TARDIS span through the Vortex, ready to begin its - *her* - new life. But there were many aspects to life, and she knew that one of the most important was home. To understand the universe, you needed to be part of that universe. And the only way to be part of that universe was to be at home in it. To have a home in it.

She emerged from the Vortex, her oh-so-human body unfazed by the hard radiation that flooded through her from the average yellow sun that glared above her. Her attention was firmly fixed on the insignificant blue ball of mud and water that orbited that sun.

Its inhabitants called it Earth.

Gathering her power, the Doctor dematerialised.

GRAEME NEIL REID

"You don't want to have all the missing pieces -- once the puzzle is complete, it's over, and the whole point is to keep playing forever."

Should Have Been Dancing

PAUL MAGRS

This will teach me some humility, perhaps.

This may teach me to listen more.

Now that I'm officially dead and some other young fella's in my shoes. Making a hash of it. Here I am in a cafe in the East End with a vile espresso. Mulling things over.

Gazing at my own serene, aristocratic expression in the steamed up mirror. Wondering whether to order pie and mash.

Who did I listen to, all those years? Was I really neglecting my friends?

I remember talking a great deal. I was erudite, affable, the star of the show. I held court and I was the life and soul of the party.

And yet.

I wish I had asked her about her family. I gave off an air of not being bothered with petty human things. The clutter that tethers them to the earth. I know I gave that impression.

When I talked it was about otherworldly things. The stuff that excited me and I hoped would excite them. What the weather was like on other planets. What curious flowers grew. How many legs and noses the creatures had. How fierce they were.

Showing off.

I could kick myself now.

For a while I watch the blue steam curling up from the urn on the counter. And I let my coffee grow cold. The cafe door bangs and crashes again and again as more of the regular customers come in, rubbing and blowing on their hands.

At last I give up my seat at the scarred Formica of the table and head off outside.

I don't think anyone watches me go.

Like a ghost, these days.

Sometimes she tried to tell me details about herself.

She dropped hints and sparkling anecdotes, fresh as my own repartee. She would slip them deftly into our fractured conversations as we pelted helter skelter through some adventure or other.

We could talk as well as flee from horrid fiends. She would attempt to tell me the tale of her dear Aunt Agnes and her bald cat, whom she baked accidentally in the Aga. The cat exploded, of course.

We would be shinning up some ghastly ventilation shaft towards a postage stamp-sized patch of cornflower blue and she would try to tell me all of her memories of her mother.

Human beings trying to distract me. To wind me in loops of their strange genealogies. Make me a prisoner of anecdote and hearsay.

Are you listening? She would ask petulantly.

Do you ever listen to me?

Yes!

I was gruff. Harrumph. Change the subject, show a clean pair of heels. Address the serious matter in hand. Usually a matter of life and death. We had stirred the down-trodden peasants to revolt against their inhuman masters. We had inadvertently freed the malignant spirit of a long-dead despot.

Why the reluctance to hear of her life?

To learn about the ordinariness I had forced her to leave behind?

Pattering on to sleet and snow out here, in the grey brown street. The traffic is slack. Everyone who was heading home has already got there. A low November tea time when all should be cosying up, prepared to stay in for the night.

I nip under the dark arches, all mildew and phosphorescent piss.

I decide to stop by the pub, cheering slightly at the winking and twinkling of the optics and polished pumps. And the winking and the twinkling of the barmaid, her hair piled high as candyfloss, her breasts pushed out fifties-style, like Zeppelins. Bit of an intellectual, this girl. She'll talk about the Russian novelists. She'd be worth taking out on a little trip.

Expertly she slops out my golden pint, my even more golden chaser and tells me - as if it's something I'd be pleased about - that my usual

cronies are camped out in the snug. They're cackling there and reminiscing, eking out their drinks behind flyblown glass.

When I think now, now I have leisure to, the poor girl was probably speaking for her own benefit. Reciting family trees and hoary old legends, just to reassure herself she was still the same person.

The selfsame mind in just the same body.

As we heedlessly trudged through deserts of glass and foetid swamps and fruity jungles, Sarah Jane was keenly clasping hold of her identity. Just as she clung to the frayed ends of my scarf.

I was too tangled up in myself and a cosmos of dire complications to take much of it in.

I thought she was just chattering on.

Her father, I think, was a Scotsman.

She once loved a young man called Peter, who was blond and limped somewhat.

She bred turtles as a schoolgirl and gave them all names. Painted them on their shells in frosted pink nail varnish.

Instead of all this, this wandering like a broken ghost in a dilapidated part of town; instead of early evening boozing in pubs like this one and autumn afternoons wasted in the park, I swear I could be working still.

I could still do the business.

The ones that the barmaid calls my cronies laugh at me, I know. They tell me I should enjoy the rest, the recuperation. Enjoy letting others take the reins.

Every bone in my body broken. A rag and bone man. A thing of shreds and patches, flung to the ground. I was shattered, dog-tired, tethered to the earth at last.

I had dropped a great height, like any great hero does at some time or other and I had faced out my greatest nemesis. And now I was lying crumpled in the flattened grass. Crumpled as an old paper bag of sweets.

But in my crimson topcoat and the lashing tentacles of my gaudy scarf - what a streak of scarlet I had made. Scything through the blue of that winter morning. Sailing to what must surely be death.

Ah, but.

Think on Holmes and Moriarty, who both took their tumbles. Think on the supposed last bow of the fiendish, sinister, brilliant Fu Manchu, who tumbled in a raft over another set of falls, and crashed a terrible height as well.

And still lived.

I've never quite believed in the idea of my own death. Such a weighty topic, a grand conceit. I've always thought such things could be laughed away.

This old man has had worse things done to him.

I've been worshipped, dismembered, prematurely aged, bound, gagged, possessed by demons, cacti and ancient gods. I've been drowned and robotised, lobotomised and shot, and sent hurtling out into the not-too cosy confines of space.

Death has never counted for much. I would even feign it, on occasion, to see what my friends' reactions would be.

I thought I could laugh such things away. I throw back my head and guffaw. Dispel them with a contemptuous snarl of belly-laughter, belying my fury, perhaps my fear.

I laugh all the same. A snaggle-toothed roar. A lion's howl of amusement. Tickled pink.

What we crusaded against was conformity.

I suppose I can see that now. It wouldn't have done, at the time, to become aware of that theme strung through our escapades. We wouldn't have wanted to be too self-conscious.

Glance down at the tightrope, catch sight of the safety-net, the audience holding their breath. Become too aware and you're sure to drop off.

I always wanted to be insouciant and blithe. To wear tennis shoes at the North Pole. To wind a woolly scarf round my neck, striding out across the Sahara. A mad dog, perhaps. Englishman, never.

From this vantage, though, I can see that our peregrinations took us through a certain trajectory.

From here, a pleasing pattern emerges. Like a lumpy shape in the tea leaves; a glimmering design in the known heavens.

So now I think: Ah. That's what we were up to, all those years ago.

In its own modest way.

A crusade.

We tripped and traipsed our way, blazing a certain trail. These were the years when you were free to opt out. What they used to call dropping out of the system. Off the electoral register, off the pay roll and out into the wide blue yonder. Sarah stepped out of her life with me and nobody raised an eyebrow, because it was still the 1970s.

Careers weren't the same then.

Travelling in time and space, though it wasn't something you'd write on your CV, was something that would still be accepted as life-enhancing. Character-building.

Sarah had a fair few gaps on her CV, what with one thing and another.

She explains them away by saying she went freelance.

We came across people who told us:

Do not come here. Do not interfere.

We all want to be the same as each other.

We want to make everyone like us.

Like you? I would ask, grinning. You can't force people to like you. You have to use a modicum of charm...

No. What we mean is, we want everyone to become like us. To share our selfsame superior mind.

Oh. That can't be right. Are you really sure? I am no longer responsible, they tell me.

But today, while the hail and sleet was just starting up and drumming down on car roofs and the pavement, I caught myself looking in the window of one of those places offering deals on mobile phones. Very handy. I imagined the bliss of keeping a tiny phone deep in my pocket, so anyone could contact me almost immediately, should they ever need my help.

I open everything expecting a summons. Telegrams, newspapers, Christmas crackers - even the tiny blue packet of salt in bags of crisps. I expect a plea, a call to arms.

And to think - in my fantastic heyday - I would respond, yes, but

come with such poor grace. Bugger off, I would tell them. I've better things to do. I've muddles of my own to be sorting out.

Now I'm hanging on the telephone, waiting on the postman's sprightly tread. Scanning the skies at night - milky pale, faint orange city skies at night - for the merest suggestion of strange lights up there.

The sketchiest hint of an erroneous glow.

Something signalling a hideous something, intent.

Here's a possibility.

I don't have many regrets, but I do get sentimental about missing things.

Missing people, I suppose.

There is, though, I tell myself, always the possibility of going back in time and interposing my present self.

I could stretch gaps in my own private timeline.

Yank them wider, like you would with knitting gone too tight.

Insert new glittering moments inbetween moments.

All of my adventures are strung like pearls, with lots of accommodating gaps. I would welcome further hours, other lives, further spots in time.

In lonely hours, my friends now gone, this thought cheers me up.

All I get this morning is another of those awful, annoying, embossed cards, printed in light blue ink. Inviting me over to his club for lunch. His swanky club.

My predecessor still has his standards.

He wouldn't be seen dead round here, on the grimy streets where I live. I have to go to him, if I want to see him. Which I don't, particularly.

He treats me like a younger brother who, entrusted with the family business, has made something of a hash of it, and ran it all disastrously into the ground. All the while he was abroad, living it up, sunning himself in the colonies, probably. Blandly believing that all his affairs at home were in safe hands. Ha!

I dropped all of his boring commissions.

Cut off his contacts with the government, the civil service, the army and navy. Everything he'd been so slavish to and respectful of.

I dropped all of his friends and acquaintances. Dropped them like a hot potato.

I took off almost immediately, to seek business elsewhere and in my own, admittedly ramshackle, fashion.

I dropped everything that was his.

What was he expecting? That I would adopt all his customs, expressions, working habits, manner of dress? Keep his place warm, till he deigned to come back?

Because, contrary to what you might think, we can come back, you know.

I dropped everything.

Everything except Sarah Jane, of course, who came with me, wherever I went.

These were my nineteen seventies.

I began in another life, as you well know, with Jo Grant. A girl who wouldn't recognise me now if I bumped into her on the King's Road or the velvet dusk of the Amazon basin.

A kind of Avengers girl, Jo. Full of learned tricks and gadgets. Clumsy at escapology. Inveigled into the secret service, where I had made my temporary home, mostly through nepotism.

We all grew fond of her, myself especially, and all shed a tear at her leaving, round the time of that affair with the giant maggots in Wales.

Then came Sarah and my most glorious, self-sacrificing, Zenlike moment of transformation. When I sprang back into the world fully-formed: my politics all changed about as radically as my atoms.

And I had Sarah at my side.

Jo was the early Seventies. Was lipgloss, glam rock, the Bay City Rollers and the very end of Carnaby Street.

Sarah was the late Seventies. The Female Eunuch, Cosmopolitan, the Bionic Woman, Donna Summer.

Sarah Jane was Disco.

They used to give away, free in packets of Weetabix, cut-out, stand-up models of me. Do you remember? Me and all my friends. Cut out and keep. Fold over the tab. Re-enact my most amazing adventures against painted backdrops of futuristic cities, jungle landscapes, arid

dustbowls hot with rocks. You would cut them from the backs of Weetabix boxes and, even weeks later, my adventures would still smell of cereal.

Remember them?

The feeding frenzy of swapping, trading, comparison, that went on across the land, in all the playgrounds in the country. Kids collecting the cut-out, stand-up cardboard figures of me, my friends and my hideous, robotic, vegetable, mutant, mineral, alien enemies.

We were all worth saving.

For her I wanted to be - and should have been - Starsky and Hutch. With a bright red Ford Capri bowling crates and cardboard boxes down sleazy alleyways, hot in pursuit.

I should have been Steve Austin, astronaut, enhanced by six million dollars.

Or Mr Fantastic, drenched in cosmic rays and endlessly elastic.

Or Obi Wan Kenobi, Gandalflike sage in shabby cloak. Or John Travolta in a flash white suit.

But I wasn't.

I was a charming, curmudgeonly dilettante, propelling the poor waif into illogical adventures in places no one would dream about.

No set plan, no agenda in mind.

Just a floating, free-thinking, peripatetic intellectual of the Nineteen Seventies.

A history man.

And she should have been dancing.

A Moment To Myself

MANSOOR MIR

This adventure is set somewhere between a delightfully witty and inventive jotting and an unoriginal and unredeemingly self-referential piece of fanwank.

It features the Doctor. Obviously.

Oh. It's you again.

So what's it going to be this time then? Historical, pseudo-historical, space opera, thriller, murder mystery, comedy, drama, farce, magical-realism or perhaps a post-modern self-referential romp? I'm afraid you might be in for a bit of a disappointment. You see I've been rushed off my feet recently and I was planning to take it easy for a while before my next adventure. There's really no point in you staying; the most exciting thing I'll be doing today is having a cup of tea. I might pick up a book at some point but I'm not promising anything.

But what's that I hear you cry? 'Aha! He's intending to put his feet up and have a rest. Something terribly unexpected is bound to occur and launch him into another exciting adventure quicker than you can say "dramatic irony"!' Well I'm afraid you couldn't be more wrong. I've just received a letter from myself (post-marked with tomorrow's date) that explains that nothing exciting, scary or horribly post-modern will be happening for at least twenty-four hours. Honestly, I can assure you that nothing interesting will be happening and you're really best off coming back and checking on me in a couple of days. I'm sure that by then the fate of the cosmos will be hanging in the balance once again.

Okay, maybe you're right. Maybe there's a teeny-tiny chance that the Daleks or Faction Paradox, as the precursor to some bizarre plan for galactic conquest, faked this letter but it's really not worth worrying about. We can't live our lives in fear of such marginally probable events. In an infinite universe (especially a fictional one) *anything* can happen, but what sort of a mess would we be in if we were literally

prepared for absolutely anything? Being squashed by a stray asteroid is a possibility but living in fear of it is, you will agree, pointlessly paranoid.

Anyway, if something does happen I promise I'll write it all down and fill you in when you come back, okay? Its not that I don't value your company - quite the opposite! As you well know I work best with an audience and it simply wouldn't be as much fun without you all. Sometimes, however, it would be nice to have some time to myself.

Once upon a time, my companions and I used to enjoy a week or two of quiet time between adventures. Then one day someone had the bright idea of filling up all the gaps. Not content with that they started stuffing new adventures into the cracks in the old ones. I sometimes feel like a wall that's more polyfiller than brick. Most worryingly of all my distant past is now being poked and prodded at by people who are too curious for their own good (a little hypocritical, I know!).

Sometimes I don't think you'll be happy until every cup of tea, every evening spent watching the telly and every secret has been recorded, retconned and stripped of mystery. Even then there will be those among you who won't be satisfied. You'll invent new lives for me. You'll force my old companions into exciting new adventures like you've done to poor Bernice. Maybe, if you get desperate, you'll travel back and insinuate yourselves into the life of the Other. Finally, when it all goes horribly ouroboros-shaped, you'll just reboot me like an old ZX80 that's crashed and start all over again.

Ho-hum.

Still here then? I suppose that if a protracted rant like that won't put you off then nothing will. If you will insist upon staying then there's not much I can do about it. Please don't think I'm bitter, it's just that I sometimes get a little tired. It's perfectly possible to not need sleep and yet be tired, believe me. Look, you people not only created me but you've kept me alive for more than a decade after they pulled the plug. It's both flattering and thrilling to be out there having new adventures but its also occasionally a little wearying.

You're perfectly welcome to stay and watch me have some tea if you feel that would entertain you. I only wish we weren't separated by reality then I could offer you all a cup too. Please excuse me if I slip

out of this first person narrative in a moment, I tend to get a headache if I keep it up for too long.

By the way, please don't let me put you off coming back again. Just remember that, like with every relationship, a little personal Space is just as important as the Time we spend together.

Au revoir.

Doctor Who In An Exciting Adventure With A Cup Of Tea

The Doctor makes himself a cup of tea. He sits back with a good book and drinks it. Nothing of note happens for a couple of hours.

As the credits are about to roll he looks up from his book and peers straight at the camera. He considers saying 'I told you so' but then remembers that the fourth wall has long since been broken down. He decides that this is a good thing because he doesn't like walls much. The thought makes him smile.

PAUL HARRISON-DAVIES

Just Who is the Doctor?

Tsuro, Hrafn, Caillou
Unseen eyes are watching you

Chango, Sinu, Coyote
Who hears what you will not say?

Lightning Bringer, Coming Storm
Words alone won't keep you warm.

Little Midwife, death and birth
Just how much is one soul worth?

Hanged man, hermit, mage and fool
(Never cowardly nor cruel)

Healer in the midst of strife;
Bound to Time, yet choosing life.

JENNIFER TIFFT

Sonnet - The Room With No Doors

What is this sere, six-sided, empty cell?
Mere metaphor? A paradox? a grave
Deep dug and shaped to prison fast in hell
The spirit self-condemned, too strong to save?
Worked from without "'were hard enough to take -
(Task Viviene with Merlin, locked in stone).
What is thy crime? What failure or mistake
That could deserve infinity alone?
This no dessert, nor penance too dear bought
Nor Justice den, but silent suicide -
Tis thee, not they, this doorless room hath wrought.
No light commitment then, thus to abide:
It is thyself that thou must first forgive
Unlock thy dreams, and learn again to live.

Inspired by "The Room With No Doors" by Kate Orman

JENNIFER TIFFT

Nursery Verse for a Loomling

What do the bees and the spiders know
What might the butterflies tell
Of pebbles and plum-blossoms, snowmen and stars,
The salmon that lives in the well?

One or the Other, a mystery
Twice brought from out the unknown
Three angled answers four-shadowed in rhyme
And five-fold reflections, half shown.

Reap the grey roses, the gold sarlain
Follow the flutterwing's flight
Reach for a future the colour of fire
And rainbowed, and red-black, and white.

Six-sided solace in solitude
Seven hues spiral and wheel
Remember the traveler, the eighth face unbound
In dreaming and doing made real.

Ravens and riddles and nursery verse
Cobblemice, owls and stars
Tempests and teacups - Now, Never and When -
And Time heals Infinity's scars.

Inspired by Marc Platt's 'Lungbarrow, and, indeed the whole 'Time's Champion' cycle.

JENNIFER TIFFT

About the Authors & Artists

A longtime Lovecraftian, **JAMES AMBUEHL** (*"Tempus Refugit"*) has had a great deal of Cthulhu Mythos fiction published in various markets, including the *Chaosium* anthologies *The Ithaqua Cycle*, and the forthcoming *Tsathoggua* and *Yig Cycles*, as well as short story collections, *From Between The Star-Spaces* and *Correlated Contents*. These can all be had from Amazon.Com. Recently, he has turned to *Doctor Who* fiction, and has had stories in *Perfect Timing, Tales Of The Solar System, The 13 Crimes Of Doctor Who* and *The Cat Who Walked Through Time.*

JON ANDERSEN (*"Self Delusion"*) is Australian and vaguely proud of the fact when it doesn't take too much effort. He's also been a *Doctor Who* fan since he can first remember watching the first Dalek movie on the TV in the dim recesses of his childhood. He's had stories published in both *Perfect Timing* volumes, edits a fanzine column for the *Doctor Who* Club of Australia, and sporadically puts out a zine of his own. He lives with two cats and the important members of his family in surburban Sydney, and travels to interesting places while asleep.

R. J. ANDERSON (*"Irresistible Force"*) started writing adventures for the Doctor as soon as she was old enough to crawl out from behind the sofa and borrow her parents' typewriter. In addition to publishing credits for original fiction and non-fiction, her fanfic has appeared in several zines, including *Myth Makers Presents*, *Enarrare* and *Perfect Timing 2*. This, her latest story, began as idle speculation on where the Fifth Doctor got that nice haircut he's sporting in "The Awakening", but as usual, a simple idea got completely out of hand. The author lives in Stratford, Ontario, Canada with her husband and infant son, neither of whom quite understand what she sees in *Doctor Who*, but think she's all right anyway.

PETER ANGHELIDES (*"The Dead Series Sketch"*) is about the same

age as *Doctor Who*. His real job is with a large multinational computer corporation. His hobby is writing novels, short fiction, reviews and articles for other companies (including several BBC *Doctor Who* books like *Kursaal, Frontier Worlds* and *The Ancestor Cell* with Stephen Cole). Although he says so himself, he's looking pretty good for someone who is 1,012 years old. Or is it 1,015?

One of Britain's most versatile and popular entertainers, **COLIN BAKER** (*"The Wings of a Butterfly"*) portrayed the Sixth Doctor in *Doctor Who*.

TREVOR BAXENDALE's (*"The Star Racer"*) first *Doctor Who* novel, *The Janus Conjunction*, was published by the BBC in 1998. *Coldheart* followed in 2000, and he also contributed *"The Queen of Eros"* to the last short story anthology published by BBC Worldwide, *Doctor Who: Short Trips and Side Steps*. His next Eighth Doctor adventure, *Eater of Wasps*, is due to be published in May 2001. With every Doctor and all eras of the programme to choose from when submitting a short story for *Missing Pieces*, he instinctively chose the Paul McGann version; out of all the Doctors, Trevor considers him to be most definitely the Eighth.

TOM BECK (*"Where Were You"*) writes when he's not editing and edits when he's not writing. When he's not editing *or* writing, he's probably at a science fiction convention, a baseball game, a soccer game, or a hockey game. In between, he helps run The Prydonians of Prynceton *Doctor Who* fan club. He also edits the quarterly newsletter of *The Friends of Doctor Who*, America's national official club. He has written lots of *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7* fan fiction, including the ridiculously too long *"What If We Went To Italy?"* in the reprinted edition of *Perfect Timing 1*. He has a ridiculously too short story in *The Cat Who Walked Through Time*. He has contributed some very strange stories to *Roving Reporter 1, 2,* and *4*. He is fat and furry and has been compared to a Primord (the Primord objected rather strenuously). You are invited to feed him chocolate.

An American happily resident in the UK, **ALLAN BEDNAR** (*Artist*) has done a few strips for *2000AD* and loads of stuff for computer games. His obsession with SF in general and *Doctor Who* in particular has been a bane of poor Charis' life for over a decade now. Many thanks to Lance for the opportunity of collaborating on the illustration for *"Iris Explains"*. Even if he was understandably steadfast in refusing to rename it 'Doctor Who and the Foul Temptress'.

JEREMY BEMENT (*Artist*) lives in the former "Place To Grow" state of Iowa. He's an avid comic book reader, sci-fi geek, Doctor Who fanatic, gaming enthusiast and backyard poet, which is why he's still single, and is hoping to one day grow up to be Kevin Smith. He's the creator of *Doctor Who: The Collective Consciousness*, a collection of author interviews, writer of several unpublished short stories, and contributor to *The Cat Who Walked Through Time*. And best of all he's finally stopped doing all of his work in crayon.

A native of Birmingham, England, the dark power behind the throne of the Oxford University *Doctor Who Society* for more years than is entirely healthy and a regular contributor to its evergreen and unstoppable fanzine, *Tides of Time*, **DAVID BICKLEY** (*"A Tale of Monsters'*) has escaped that life of degradation, violence and curry and now finds himself living in Guildford. Something, somewhere went terribly wrong.

JONATHAN BLUM (*"Missing Pieces"*) has been in deep cover as a software engineer for more than two years now, but is gradually creeping back into *Doctor Who* fiction. His work on a surprisingly popular Seventh Doctor fan video called *Time Rift* introduced him to his future wife Kate Orman; since then he's contributed scenes and plot material to several of Kate's novels (including the upcoming *The Year of Intelligent Tigers*) and written three eighth-Doctor books with her. On his own, he's written the short story *"Model Train Set"*, and the seventh-Doctor audiodrama *The Fearmonger*; he hopes that one of these days Gary will read the next audio proposal he's sent in. He's also got a BBV audio coming out this year, and in his tiny fragments of

spare time he's done a bit of acting - in Andrew Shellshear's short film *"Once Upon A Time"*, and an as-yet unreleased *Protoverse* episode with Rupert Booth. He tips his hat to Steve and Peter for inspiring his *Missing Pieces* story.

ARNOLD T. BLUMBERG (*"The Science of Magic and Vice Versa (aka Attack of the Gluons"*), is co-author and designer of *Howe's Transcendental Toybox*, the first-ever guide to *Doctor Who* collectibles. He is also Editor of *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*. He toils as a science fiction and comic book entertainment journalist, serving as Book Editor for *EON* Magazine (www.mothership.com) and the writer of eBay's on-line sci-fi collecting guide. He teaches a course in comic book literature for the University of Maryland (neat, huh?). Every so often, he sleeps. His first full-fledged experience with Doctor Who was watching Colin Baker and Jon Pertwee episodes (*"Attack of the Cybermen"* and *"Ambassadors of Death"* on MPT and WETA respectively), but he fuzzily recalls seeing *"The Armageddon Factor"* and *"The Leisure Hive"* as a small tyke. Despite all of that, he considers Peter Davison to be the quintessential Doctor. He also has a story in *The Cat Who Walked Through Time* and now plans to pelt BBC Books with proposals. He plays guitar and thinks Paul Simon is God.

DANIEL BLYTHE (*"Waste")* was born during *"The War Games"* and still has all his own teeth. He is the author of several published books, some of which were based on *"Doctor Who"* and some of which weren't. He has just completed a fantasy novel for older children. Daniel lives in Yorkshire with his gorgeous wife Rachel and multi-talented baby daughter Elinor (who is already fascinated by Tom Baker).

JAMES and **ERIN BOW** (*"A Stone of the Heart"*) met through fan fiction and both are eternally grateful. Erin is a published poet and a Physics graduate from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. James is a fan fiction writer and editor and an Urban Planning graduate from the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario. In terms of fiction,

this is their first joint project to be published. In terms of life's joint projects, they are currently working on a marriage and have successfully kept things going for over two years.

COLIN BRAKE (*"Going Home"*) was script executive on the British spy series *Bugs* and script associate on *Family Affairs*. He created the character of Anji Kapoor for BBC Books, who was introduced in his first novel for the range, *Escape Velocity*, in early 2001; her first adventure (sort of) with the Doctor, however, is chronicled here.

SIMON BUCHER-JONES (*"In the Days of 'the Days of "the Days of Our Lives"* and *"Tempus Refugit"*) is a mild mannered fellow living his technocolour dreams of other worlds as much as possible thankee kindly. He is the author of *The Death of Art, Ghost Devices*, and several short stories, the co-author of *The Taking Of Planet 5*, and is writing *Grimm Reality* with Kelly Hale, the October 2000 BBC Eighth Doctor novel.

NICK CAMPBELL's (*"Here Again"*) many and varied passions get him into trouble and adventure every single day. He's tidy and well-mannered but refuses to conform on others' say-so. He won the NLU Creative Writing Competition and currently runs a Creative Writing group, its website and its magazine. He's appeared in *The 13 Crimes of Doctor Who* and *The Cat Who Walked Through Time* and also has a short story somewhere... He has a comic strip in the underground comiczine *Topaz* (and one to come - soon), and a screenplay to be filmed later this year. You can contact him at Dairmid@earthling co uk. He advises you to go down to the woods today, as you're sure of a big surprise. His favourite Doctor is probably Peter Davison.

JIM CATAPANO (*"Letting Go"*) is hoping to become a struggling writer; for the moment he's just struggling with everything else. He's an editor by day, musician, cartoonist and graduate student by night, and the rest of time is given over to delusions of grandeur. Jim exists physically in New York, and virtually at jimcatapano.com. His favorite Doctor is the one with the coat.

DAMON CAVALCHINI (*"Fiction Paradox"*) is an international super spy currently cleverly disguised as a 28-year-old desktop publisher living in Brisbane, Australia. His brilliant cover story involves a wife, two cats and some auspicious guff about wanting to be a successful writer. To this end he's published a couple a short stories (one of which, *"Painting History"* in *Perfect Timing 2*, also features David Holmes) and has written a couple of plays for local theatre. Could anybody reading this biography please send a note to the editors with your address and the most convenient time for the men in black suits to come round and remind you about your country's relevant Official Secrets legislation? Sorry about the hassle but you wouldn't want the world to be destroyed, now, would you?

STEPHEN COLE (*"Fitz Kreiner and the Onion Doom"*) was born in 1971. He liked books, and so went to the University of East Anglia to read more of them. In 1996, after editing BBC Worldwide's preschool magazines, he opted to oversee *Doctor Who* books, videos and audios for the BBC instead. Three years later, half-dead, he was charitably offered employment by Penguin Books as a Managing Editor; he has since left full-time employment to pursue 'a freelance career writing and editing. Stephen has had several books published, from children's poetry to Home Learning titles and from non-fiction to novelisations of award-winning Disney/BBC TV series *Microsoap*. As a writer for *Doctor Who* he has produced audio dramas, assorted articles and reviews and co-written several novels including *Parallel 59* with Natalie Dallaire, *The Ancestor Cell* with Peter Anghelides, and the forthcoming *The Shadow of the Glass* with Justin Richards, as well as his solo novel for the range, *Vanishing Point* also due this year.

LISA CONNER (*Artist*) lives in the rolling hills of central North Carolina, where she works the graveyard shift inspecting circuit boards. During the day, she plays way too many video games, sleeps, and does a bit of drawing between the two.

SUE COWLEY (*"Loose Ends"*) is a real live genuine FanGirl (no she is, really!). She still claims that one day she will finish her Magnificent

Octopus about Lytton, and currently lives in Sunny Ruislip with her very own, fully house-trained member of the DW Restoration team, a cute black cat and far too many DVDs... By day, Sue manages the back catalogue for BBC Worldwide's international TV sales division (including writing the linking narration for BBC Radio's *Doctor Who* audio CD soundtrack range), and in her spare time she enjoys slaying aliens with Mike Tucker and watching Basil Brush with her best buddy Tara Samms. Sue likes any colour, as long as its purple.

DYLAN CRAWFOOT and **PETER PETROFF** (*"For Queen and Country"*) are long time residents of Brisbane, Australia - better known to *Doctor Who* fans as the home of Tegan Jovanka and WengChiang. Although they have known each other for over ten years, *"For Queen and Country"* is their first joint writing effort. Since his *Doctor Who* experience began about twenty years ago, Peter has had a number of stories published in fanzines - in 1992 his first story *"The Refugees"* was nominated in the Australian fan awards, the Double Gammas. *"For Queen and Country"* is Dylan's first published piece, but he did once write a rather good letter to a fanzine. For a living, Peter fixes computers (and more often their users) at a Brisbane university. A student himself, he likes exploring and promoting powerful alternatives to the IT world's equivalent of the Cybermen, while Dylan thoroughly enjoys being a sound recordist, engineer and editor for a local radio station.

CHARLES DANIELS (*"Dinner Conversation"*) is an aspiring amateur who has been published in both volumes of *Perfect Timing* and fan publications such as *The 13 Crimes Of Doctor Who*. For fun he receives rejection letters from esteemed publishing houses and occassionally loses his mind and wanders aimlessly about Europe. To lend moral or immoral support please write to cdaniels@calweb.com

Veteran British television actor **PETER DAVISON** (*Introduction*) is best known for his portrayal of the Fifth Doctor on *Doctor Who*, though you may remember him as Tristan Farnon from *All Creatures Great and Small* as well.

MARTIN DAY (*"Dead Men's Place"*) was born just in time to watch episode 4 of *"The Web of Fear"*, but has been late for pretty much everything since. His earliest ambition was to be a mad scientist. Oh yes. Or a writer. He eventually settled on the latter option, and has written record reviews for the *NME*, features for *The Guinness Book of Records*, a handful of *Doctor Who* novels, and scripts for a soap opera, but probably not one you've ever heard of. Martin lives in Somerset with his wife and a zoo that variously comprises two children, a cat, a pair of snakes, a finite number of tropical fish, and a wild lizard that lives outside the back door.

With the 1996 publication of *"UNITed We Fall"* in *Decalog 3: Consequences*, **KEITH R.A. DECANDIDO** (*"Raymond's Room"*) gained the odd distinction of being the first native-born American citizen to write official *Doctor Who* fiction. Having done that story set in his native New York, his second foray into Who prose is set in his favorite city to visit, Key West, Florida. He's also written novels, short stories, comic books, nonfiction and eBooks of *Star Trek; Farscape, Bujj, the Vampire Slayer, Xena, Young Hercules, Magic: the Gathering,* and *Marvel Comics*. He co-developed the *Star Trek S.C.E.* franchise of eBooks, and wrote the second installment of *Fatal Error*. His output for 2001 will include the novels *ST:TNG: Diplomatic Implausibility* (on sale now), *Farscape: House of Cards* (Spring), and *Star Trek DS9: Demons of Air and Darkness* (Fall); the short story *"Recurring Character"* in *The Further Adventures of Xena Warrior Princess* (Fall); and assorted *Star Trek S.C.E.* eBooks and *Farscape* short stories. Find out more than you could possibly need to know at www.decandido.net.

PATRICK DEGAN (*Artist*) has written and illustrated for fanzines and newsletters since 1981. A professional illustrator, photographer, and graphic designer, he lives in New Orleans.

JONATHAN W. DENNIS (*"The Killing of a Flash Boy"*) lives in Ventura, California with his wife Wendy, three cats, and a fish. His previous Doctor Who work includes stories in *Perfect Timing 2, The Cat Who*

Walked Through Time and *Eye of Orion*. He continues to hurl proposals at the BBC. More fiction and information is available at Nothing Remains Constant - http://members.nbci.com/JonDennis/.

JOHN S. DREW (*"Time Gained, Time Lost"*) has been a doorman, library assistant, waiter, bartender, restaurant manager, hostage negotiator and maker of some of the best chicken and pasta dishes east of the Mississippi. In his spare time, John crafts stories he hopes somebody will enjoy. His previous writing credits include stories in the *Untold Tales of Spider Man* and *Tales of the Solar System* anthologies; audio dramas for ART Productions and WCRS Radio Stage, and a number of *Doctor Who* audio dramas for Everlasting Films in America. Check out his website at http://members.aol.com/DREWSITUpersonaUindex.htm.

JULIAN "JAY" EALES (*"Walk A Mile In My Shoes"*) was born during the Troughton era, so his Doctors were Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker. It's pretty obvious that he'd choose to dip into that era for his Missing Piece. He was at his best friend's birthday party when the final part of *Planet of Spiders* was broadcast. To say that the ending put a bit of a dampener on proceedings would be an understatement. No amount of Chivers jelly was able to console him. As luck would happen, part one of *Robot* was broadcast at his own birthday party, so in a way, the Fourth Doctor was a wonderful present. But that's okay, he doesn't mind sharing him with the rest of you! Best known as co-editor of *Perfect Timing 2* and the forthcoming *Walking In Eternity*. Well... you knew he'd have to get a plug in there somewhere, didn't you?

ZOE ELLIS (*"Juggling"*) is in her early thirties and lives in Scotland. This is her first published story.

STEVE EMMERSON (*"The Billion Year Heart"*) is a new kid on the BBC's block. He wrote the September 2000 Eighth Doctor novel, *Casualties of War*. His second *Doctor Who* novel *Dark Progeny* is due in 2001. He lives at a top secret location somewhere in the UK and generally maintains a scrupulous anonymity in all things. Hence these infuriatingly obvious and empty biogs. You can, however, learn a bit

more about Steve by logging on to www. steveemmerson.com, from where you can even sometimes communicate with this reclusive man of mystery.

SIMON EXTON (*"The Last Song I'll Ever Sing"*) is a research chemist, currently living in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Like all good writers, he's had a long string of bizzare jobs including factory worker, insurance claim handler, model, bouncer, DJ, barman, tutor, mortuary attendant and slimming advisor. Like all good *Doctor Who* fans, he's had a long string of silly haircuts, with the mohawk being most memorable (and ultimately, the most flammable). He is unnaturally tall and wears way too much black leather. He shares a house with a strange New Zealander and a large snake.

HELEN FAYLE (*"Bedlam"*) is the co-editor of the two charity Doctor Who anthologies *Perfect Timing I* and *2* and story/commisioning editor of a forthcoming non-Who fantasy collection called *Nine Lives*. She is currently setting up a small press to publish SF and Fantasy. "Funnily enough becoming an editor wasn't in The Plan..." she says with a puzzled frown.

MIKE FICHERA (*Artist*) is a freelance illustrator by night, environmental engineer by day. He currently resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia with his wife Maria. His artwork was published weekly from 1989 to 1992 on the campus of Manhattan College in his cartoon strip "*Points to Ponde*r". As well as being a cartoonist and engineer, Mike is also an amateur filmmaker, a toy customizer, and a writer on the Internet for *Raving Toy Maniac* and Spider-Fan.org

MATT FITTON (*"Fear and Logarithms in Las Vegas"*) came into being just a couple of months after the start of Jon Pertwee's tenure and is therefore obliged to have giant spiders as a vivid early memory, and Tom Baker as a favourite Doctor. Originally from Bradford, he now lives in Oxford with the lovely Polly. A degree in Classics and English has equipped him for a wide range of jobs including cinema manager, record label promoter (not quite as exciting as it sounds) and Royal Mail customer services (definitely just as horrendous as it sounds). He

now succeeds in convincing people on a daily basis that he knows about the economics of the auto industry and writes for regular publications. He is still holding out for a position with the job description 'rich and famous'. Actually, he would now be prepared to compromise and just take 'rich'.

JOSHUA LOU FRIEDMAN (*"Coda"*) has worked as a production coordinator in films and television over the last 12 years. His television credits range from children's animation *(Inspector Gadget, GI Joe, The Real Ghostbusters*), to documentaries (*Movie Magic, World of Wonder*), to music videos (*Night Flight*, MTV's *Catwalk* starring Neve Campbell). His feature film credits include *Teacher's Pet, Club Vampire, True Vinyl, From Dusk Till Dawn 3, Lifeform* starring Ryan Phillipe and *Safe House* starring Patrick Stewart. As a writer, Joshua was a contributing author for *Toon* Magazine and served as editor for the novel *Filmation: A Studio History*. His genre credits include helping to create the Thomas Riker character for *Star Trek The Next Generation*. In fan fiction, he penned *"Homecoming"*, a story from the *Red Dwarf* anthology *Tales from the Dwarfside*. In 2000, Joshua produced the feature film *One Bad Day*, based on a script he co-wrote with the film's director. He currently resides in Hermosa Beach, California.

SIMON JOHN GERARD (*"Revolver"*) is the editor of the widely read science fiction media magazine *Dreamwatch*, and has written two audio dramas for BBV: the acclaimed *Old Soldiers* and *Infidel's Comet* (both with Colin Hill). His former life as a radio producer granted him access to a host of *Doctor Who* actors and crew, which eventually led to a tabloid frenzy when he was seen in the company of starlet Wendy Padbury. The pair now live in southeast London with a cat called Billy and a rat called Gary (now deceased).

GREG GICK (*"Eutydice's Reprieve"*), a native of Lafayette, Indiana, writes in his spare time between slaying dragons, urban crimefighting, and serving as ambassador to Sirius IV. That, or he's a habitual liar. You decide.

SIETEL SINGH GILL (*"Oblivion Lurks Near the Coffee Machine"*) is lovely. Just really, really lovely. But loveliness comes at a cost. Sietel is not afraid of death.

MATT GRADY (*Artist*) is a gentle giant who dwells in the mountains of Canada's west coast. A computer science graduate of the University of Victoria, Matt spends his free time writing stories, playing guitar, swing dancing and watching way too many movies. He also edits *Myth Makers*, an award-winning fan fiction anthology (http://www.csc.uvic.ca/-ingrady/drwho.html)

SARAH HADLEY (*"The Isidore Corporation"*) lives in the United States, where she spends a lot of time wishing she was in Britain. To keep from descending into complete despair, she writes *Doctor Who* stories, having previously written for *Perfect Timing, Tales Of The Solar System, The Cat Who Walked Through Time* (with James Ambuehl), and her own fan anthology, *The 13 Crimes Of Doctor Who*. She is currently studying Video Production at university, which shows her youth, and reading Philip K. Dick novels, which shows her taste. She also wrote this bio, which shows her ego. Finally, she has failed the Voigt-Kampff test numerous times... and that's why she needs to leave now.

MAGS L HALLIDAY (*"Watch Out! Watch Out!"*) is a Jo Grant with Axos falling in Doctor Who birthchart terms. This explains the forgetful manner and the red hair (especially when she had dreadlocks). Previous crimes against fanfiction have occurred in the *Perfect Timing* books, as well as in her own *Tav'zine*. Her Real Life has taken her to five of the world's continents, but she thinks it might be a bit difficult to sell penguins technical support and therefore her dream of visiting all seven by Spring 2001 is fading fast.

PAUL HARRISON-DAVIES (*Artist*) lives in London, England with his lovely wife and a lovlier collection of comics. He has only recently rediscovered *Doctor Who* from his long ago childhood. Charm, wit and good looks are all features he can admire in others. He would really

like to spend all his days writing and illustrating but so far no one is willing to pay him for either. So for now he'll have to earn a living book-selling... although the words earn and living do not seem to go with his career choice. Contact him at: paul@harrisondavies.freeserve.co.uk.

BRET HERHOLZ (*"Old Scores"*) first memories from *Doctor Who* was seeing Tom Baker in *"The Invasion of Time"*. To this day he is terrified of Tom Baker. Bret currently resides in Spencer, Massachusetts where he spends most of his time drawing and writing. This is his first *Doctor Who* tale, so please be gentle.

CLAYTON HICKMAN (*Artist*) is the assistant editor of *Doctor Who Magazine*, a member of *DWM*'s Time Team, provides the covers for Big Finish's range of *Doctor Who* audios and is currently co-authoring one with Gareth Roberts. He's as surprised by all that as anyone.

CRAIG HINTON (*"Aspects of Evil"*) was born in London in 1964, and had the good fortune to go to Warwick University with Justin Richards and Andy Lane, and work for IBM with Peter Anghelides and - wait for it - Justin Richards. Having spent 15 years in various parts of the IT industry as a programmer, technical author and magazine editor, he is currently a freelance IT consultant and journalist, and tends to spend his time eating, drinking and flying around the world at PR companies' expense. His eighth novel - and fourth *Doctor Who* novel - *The Quantum Archangel*, was published by BBC Books at the start of 2001. *"Aspects of Evil"* the framing story for this collection, is the short story he has wanted to write since 1984. Sad, huh?

DAVID J. HOWE (*"Mind Over Matter"*) has been involved with *Doctor Who* research and writing for over 20 years, and is the author of nineteen factual titles associated with the show. David is contributing editor to *Starburst* magazine and has edited the book reviews column for that magazine since 1984, and also reviews editor for *Shivers* magazine. He is on the committee of the British Fantasy Society (which won the World Fantasy Award for Best Non-Professional in 2000), and has edited and published several books for them, including *Shocks* (by

Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes), *Annabelle Says* (by Simon Clark and Stephen Laws), *Miscellany Macabre* (by Ken Cowley), British and World Fantasy Award shortlisted *Manitou Man* (a hardback and paperback collection by horror author Graham Masterton) and *F20* (a new annual anthology series). Through his own publishing imprint he has editied and published the first in a series of tie-in anthologies based on the UK TV Horror series *Urban Gothic*. He wrote the book *Reflections: The Fantasy Art of Stephen Bradbury* for Dragon's World Publishers and has contributed short horror and *Doctor Who* fiction to *Peeping Tom, Dark Asylum, Decalog, Perfect Timing* and *Perfect Timing 2* and factual articles to *James Herbert: By Horror Haunted*. In addition he has written articles, interviews and reviews for a wide number of publications including *Fear, Dreamwatch, Stage and Television Today, The Dark Side, Skeleton Crew, Doctor Who Magazine, The Guardian, Film Review, SFX,* Amazon.co.uk's SF pages, *LineOne Science Fiction Forum* and *Sci-Fi Entertainmen*t.

OLIVIA JAMES (*"A Time To Choose"*) has recently rediscovered *Doctor Who* after a long absence. At the time of writing she is a technical writer in Tehran although she hopes to be living somewhere civilised by the time of publication.

CHRISTOPHER A. JONES (*Artist*) is a freelance illustrator living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has done extensive work in the field of comic book art for publishers including DC and Image Comics. His work has appeared in titles such as DC Comics' *JLA* and the *Day of Judgement* mini-series. Chris is also the artist-in-residence for CONvergence, a Minnesota-based SF convention, providing artwork for their publications, T-shirts, and other merchandise.

LORELEI S. JORDAN (*"The Ashes of Eden"*) is a substitute teacher in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and originally hails from Lubbock, Texas. Quadruplegic since her early twenties, she works with local school kids in Baton Rouge and nearby neighborhoods who face the same situation, and in 1997 won a statewide award for her efforts with quadruplegic children at a Louisiana grade school. Having discovered

Doctor Who on MPT when she lived in Maryland for eight months, she's been a fan of the series ever since. Her favorite Doctor is Tom Baker, not only because she's seen his episodes more times than the others. Her latest passions are quilting, *Charmed* and lobbying for the protection of rain forests. This is her first published work. She says she hates *"Nightmare of Eden"* and doesn't know why anyone would be foolish enough to write a sequel.

TIM KEABLE (*Artist*) was born in the year 2bd (before Doctor) and started drawing at an early age. Over the years he has had several illustrations published in both professional and amateur publications. Most notable of these are *Doctor Who Magazine*, Virgin books, and last year's *Perfect Timing 2*. Tim has also illustrated and designed several posters for plays and also done some storyboard work.

TOM and **ALRYSSA KELLY** (*"Eye of the Beholder"*) are a gestalt entity; Tom is originally from Cleveland, Ohio, and Alryssa Kelly is from Cardiff in Wales. It has been creating havoc since it met at Visions '98. Tom is known to most folks as the Eighth Doctor Clone; Alryssa as... well, Alryssa, except in *The Ancestor Cell*, when she's a he. Alryssa can be found frequenting rec.arts.drwho and #drwhochat on DALnet. Tom, on the other hand, practices the art of lurking.

DANIEL KUKWA (*"The Breach"*) has tried really, really hard to find something to say about himself in this bio that would make him stand out from the rest of the crowd. However, despite the fact that he attempted to bribe, seduce, con, and swindle at least four people into writing something devestatingly witty and descriptive, nothing came of his plans. In the end, this Canadian high school teacher of excessive height wishes everyone to know that his life would have been much easier had he stuck to the idea of being a bus driver. His biggest achievements include being able to block light sources, and having the honour of being friends with fellow authors James and Erin Bow.

PAUL LEONARD HINDER (*"Brought to Book"*), known as Paul Leonard in print, has been writing *Doctor Who* novels (including such works as *Venusian Lullaby, Revolution Man, Genocide, Dream-stone*

Moon, Speed of Flight and *Dancing the Code*) for five years, and is therefore broke. He is lazy, inefficient, imaginative and recently married, which is not a good combination, though his new wife still hasn't noticed. His latest novel, *The Turing Test*, is better than the others he wrote, and is still in the shops he expects, so go and buy it and keep the bailiffs from the door.

SHAUN LYON (Commissioning Editor & Publisher, plus *"How The Mighty..."*) has tackled *Doctor Who* fandom head-on for 14 years, as editor of the popular website *Outpost Galley* (www. gallifreyone.com) and the widely-read email newszine *Doctor Who Alliance of North America* (www.drwhoalliance.com), and as cofounder/program director of *Gallifrey One*, America's longest-running *Doctor Who* convention. He was formerly SysOp of CompuServe's SF & Fantasy Media Forum; a paid consultant to Pocket Books' *Star Trek* novel line; editor of a *Red Dwarf* fiction zine, *"Tales From the Dwarfside"*; and a contributor to *The Cat Who Walked Through Time*. A three-time chairman of Loscon (L.A.'s regional science fiction convention) and actively involved in local con-running fandom, he's now serving on the L.A. bid committee for the 2006 World Science Fiction Convention. Shaun lives in suburban Los Angeles with his understanding partner Chad Jones, is studying to be a teacher, and enjoys film & TV, politics, web development, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team - not necessarily in that order. It is almost certain he will die early of exhaustion.

STEVE LYONS (*"In the Frame"*) lives in Salford, in the North-West of England, and still doesn't regret leaving his job at a large bank to become a full-time writer. He wrote the *Doctor Who* novels *Conundrum, Time of Your Life, Head Games, Killing Ground, The Murder Game, The Witch Hunters, Salvation, The Final Sanction* and *The Space Age*, as well as short stories for the three *Short Trips* collections and the Big Finish audio adventure *The Fires of Vulcan*. He is currently working on another audio script, *Colditz*, and is a regular contributor to *Doctor Who Magazine*. His non-*Doctor Who* work

includes books about *Star Trek, Red Dwarf* and *Blackadder*, articles for numerous magazines and short stories featuring the Marvel superheroes.

PAUL MAGRS (*"Should Have Been Dancing"*) was born in 1969. He has published nine books, the most recent of which are *Doctor Who: Verdigris* (Iris Wildthyme runs about in space with Jon Pertwee), *Modern Love* (murder, twin sisters and psychics in the north of England), and *All the Rage* (terrible 80s pop group attempt a comeback). He lectures in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. His next *Doctor Who* novel, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, is due in early 2002.

Living in Somerset, **MATT MARSHALL** (*"A Whisper Of Light"*) would like to apologise that he neither rides nor even owns a tractor! What a wicked, wicked world we live in... Instead, he is more interested in insane money-making schemes, the latest being an attempt to get a *Who* book published. Of course, the submissions themselves are all crap, so it's off to buy a couple of pounds of plastic explosive to strap around his waist (it's the only way to get published) Oh yeah, blab blab blab... two cats... blab blab blab...

A versatile stage, television and film actor, **SYLVESTER McCOY** (*Afterword*) portrayed the Seventh Doctor in *Doctor Who*, and used to stuff ferrets down his trousers for a living. But we still love him.

GREG McELHATTON (*"Outside Forces"*) currently lives outside the Washington DC area, where he is an instructional designer for the US Government. His professional sales include stories in the anthologies *Treachery & Treason* and the Bram Stoker Award-winning *Horrors! 365 Scary Stories*. He was also a regular contributor to *Wizard: The Guide to Comics* for its first five years. He also helps run the Small Press Expo comics convention every year in Bethesda, Maryland, was a co-editor of the *Expo 2000* comics anthology, and writes the *iComics Daily Reviews*. Greg wishes he had some spare time because he sure misses having a life.

BRADLEY McGRATH (*"The Doctor And The Dragon"*) lives in Perth, Western Australia. He was 17 when he wrote this story, 18 when he sent it to *Missing Pieces*, and will be 19 by the time of publication. This story was originally submitted to the *Short Trips And Side Steps* collection, but it wasn't purchased... their loss, *Missing Pieces*' gain. This, he says, is the best thing that has ever happened to him (until his dreams of publishing a *Doctor Who* book come true). "Thank you for reading it," Bradley says, "and I hope you enjoyed it." He can be praised or cursed at bradley_mcgrath@ hotmail.com

DAVID A. McINTEE *("Time Out"*) was born at a very young age, and hasn't died yet. After being trained in electronic engineering, systems analysis and software design - plus working a graphic design studio - he decided that he'd much rather not have to actually work for a living. He has written ten *Doctor Who* novels, with an eleventh, *Bullet Time*, due in August. He is also the author of *Delta Quadrant*, the only published guidebook to *Star Trek Voyager*, and writes regularly for the likes of *Dreamwatch*. His current workload includes his first original novel, *Knight Sky*, due next Spring/Summer, an audio CD for BBV, and a TV Movie for the US market. David lives in Yorkshire with Ambassador Mollari and four cats. He collects weapon props from SF shows/movies, and swords. David's primary role models in youth were Tom Baker's Doctor, Kerr Avon, and Graeme Garden, so members of the public should be wary of approaching him.

IAN McINTIRE (*"Fathers, Friends, and Other Objects of Hate"*) is a myth. All known sightings of this fabled being can be easily attributed to swamp gas, the planet Venus, weather balloons, and the odd reflective properties of Lake Michigan. He has never contributed to *Perfect Timing* or its sequel, never had his name mispelled by *DWM*, never been Moderator of the Doctor Who Missing Internet Adventures or contributed to the IAs in general. He is not a mild-mannered software documentation writer by day, actor by night, and does not write *Doctor Who* fiction on his lunch hours. He does not reside in Chicago. He is, however, available for weddings, mitzvahs of all varieties, and all other special events. To report a sighting (or to book your special event),

contact the Bio-weapons division of the US government, Neutralization and Retrieval Section. Ask for Steve, and let it ring.

MARK MICHALOWSKI (*"In vino veritas"*) lives in the UK with his boyfriend Mike. Mark regularly stays home and amuses himself in his study, spends far too much on magazines every month, and would quite like a life. Although if it's a choice between *Doctor Who* and a life, he knows which he'd prefer. His dream is to be invited to a *Doctor Who* convention and to sit in the bar all weekend, scared to speak to anyone, and get a reputation for being snooty and aloof. His first novel for BBC Books, *Relative Dementias* starring the Seventh Doctor and Ace, is due out in early 2002. The final story in *Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Dead Men Diaries* is also his, and he still gets a lovely warm tingle when he thinks about it.

JAMES MIDDLEDITCH (*"The Memory of Stones"*) is 21 years old, is studying Media and Film Studies at University in Winchester, England, and is on his way to fulfilling his destiny as a writer of television and novels. He tends to see his life as a story and stories as his life, which might be quite worrying except that, as has been said, "Stories are the greatest things in the world." He would like to thank his friends and family for putting up with this - if the stories are good, they have a lot to do with it. *"The Memory of Stones"* is based on a visit to Auschwich a few years ago, and the story is his small attempt at honouring those who died there in the way he knows best. And who else but the Doctor could help him do this?

JON DE BURGH MILLER (*"Fate Healer"*) is the author of *Dying in the Sun*, a BBC *Doctor Who* novel due to be published at the end of 2001. Other credits include (but are not limited to) co-writing *Twilight of the Gods*, the final book in Virgin's '*New Adventures*' series and numerous articles for Titan's "*The Official Xena: Warrior Princess Magazine*". He lives in London and when he's not writing spends his time watching movies and dancing to pop music.

MANSOOR MIR (*"A Moment to Myself"*) lives in London and

Nottingham and is studying Mathematics and Philosophy at Nottingham University. He's in his third and final year and is hoping to go on to law school so that he can fend off Real World for a little bit longer. His hobbies include Pokemon, drinking invisible tea, making the world a better place, traveling, meeting people who think and act differently and just having a generally cool time. His ambition is to find spiritual and intellectual fulfillment by learning how to harness the unimaginably immense power of the previously untapped regions of the human brain and also to get a *Doctor Who* story published. So far he's half way there. His dislikes include war, pestilence, famine, death, Jim Davidson, Marmite, The Fear, growing up and, finally, trying to sum up your whole life in a couple of hundred words without being either too boring or just irritatingly self-referential. Oops.

JONATHAN MORRIS (*"The Silent City"*) lives in north-west London and works for a synthpop duo. He is the author of the reasonably popular *Doctor Who* novel *Festival Of Death* and the forthcoming Doctor Who audio *Bloodtide*. He is currently working on several blinding ideas for future *Doctor Who* books and audios.

MIKE MORRIS (*"Shadows Cast"*) lacks a yard in pace, a foot in height, any notion of what a pass is and any real goalscoring instinct. However, he is retained at centre forward by his football team for his devastating ability to dive in the box and win penalties through subterfuge and cunning. He plays a different football to others, sniffing out penalties, tracking them unerringly through the confusion of players and footballs before letting out a perfectly-timed scream of anguish and hurling his body full-stretch to trap them, helpless, in their lair. Oh, and he likes *Doctor Who* and writes a bit. He lives in Dublin.

At the tender age of 35, with a degree in computer graphics, and her trophy husband, Jonathan Dennis, **WENDY MUIR** (*Artist*) fled the Deep South, never to return. They came to Ventura, the jewel of Southern California, where they now live in a two bedroom palace overlooking the Pacific Ocean. She dresses fabulously and dabbles in all of the things she loves: acting, art, horses, and gourmet cooking. As of this

date, they are Pretty Much Living Happily Ever After. The End.

Actress, author, agent and entertainer, **WENDY PADBURY** (*"The Shadow Knows"*) thrilled audiences in the 1960's during her two years portraying intrepid space scientist Zoe Heriot during the fifth and sixth seasons of *Doctor Who*.

LANCE PARKIN (*"Iris Explains"*) is the author of (among many other things) the Eighth Doctor Adventure *Father Time*, the BBV video *Cyberon*, and the forthcoming novel *Emmerdale: Their Finest Hour*, which features a sneaky Eighth Doctor cameo that he got away with.

LARS PEARSON (*"Tea with Cthulhu"*) started his journalism career as a newspaper editor, reporting on riveting stories such as nude skydivers, burning brothels and E Coli outbreaks. In New York, he served as price guide manager for *Wizard, ToyFare* and *InQuest Gamer* magazines, sagely and with great zen advising fans how to overcharge for their collectibles. In *"Whoville",* Lars wrote *I, Who: The Unauthorized Guide To Doctor Who Novels*, nearly dying from the overdose of reading more than 150 "Doctor Who" books in less than a year. He currently writes medical articles for the fat paychecks, plus is busy writing books on Iowa farm stories, corporate technology management, guides to *"Transformers"* and *"G.I. Joe"* and - quite naturally - *I, Who 2*. His name can be rearranged to say "Slap No Rears."

JOHN PEEL (*"On the Town"*) was born in Nottingham, England, in 1954. He moved to the U.S. in 1981 to marry his "*Doctor Who*" penpal, Nan, and they currently live on Long Island with one cat and six dogs. When they allow him to, he writes full-time. He's penned several *Doctor Who* books, including the very first Virgin New Adventure *Timewyrm: Genesys* and the Virgin Missing Adventure *Evolution*, and two BBC *Doctor Who* novels, *War of the Daleks* and *Legacy of the Daleks*. His 97th novel, *Gene Roddenberry's Xander In The Lost Universe*, will be out in July from DAW Books.

MARK PHIPPEN (Story Editor, plus *"Brought to Book"*) feels a bit

guilty. It was he who, with Helen Fayle, started this whole 'fan produced charity collection on a grand scale' thing off back in 1998 with the publication of the first volume of *Perfect Timing*, the breakthrough collection of short stories, drabbles, poems and artwork by professionals and fans in aid of the Foundation for the Study of Infant Death. Since then, there have been numerous similar collections including a second volume of *Perfect Timing, Tales of the Solar System, The Cat Who Walked Through Time, Walking in Eternity* and now *Missing Pieces*, which sees Mark return to the role of story editor. As all of these collections have raised a ton of money for various good causes, Mark, on reflection, doesn't feel guilty one little bit.

Born in New York and raised in New Jersey, **JON PINTO** (*Artist*) first discovered *Doctor Who* on public television during high school. He never forgot the good Doctor even as he went on to art school in Florida and became an illustrator. In fact, a piece from his senior thesis was of *Doctor Who*. Jon still lives in Florida and currently works for Walt Disney..

RON PLATH (*Artist*) is a manic-depressive artist/cartoonist who keeps his talents hidden until needed. Do not approach him during a full moon. He is also the author of *"Time, Love, and TARDIS"* from *Doctor Who Magazine 189*.

JAMES POTTER (*"While Stocks Last"*) has been writing *Doctor Who* stories since he was very small, although it's only in recent years that he's started inflicting them on other people. He started writing very short stories and, over recent times, has slowly increased the length of these to what he has now reached today. His ambition is to one day write a *Doctor Who* novel and at his current rate he should have reached novel-length prose by about 2004. In the meantime it gives him great pleasure that people constantly think his work is worth reading. By day he does stuff which you don't want to know about, by night he is a member of fan group The Unregenerate and together they "plot", "scheme" and "have ideas". Sometimes they act on them too, though they can involve tequila and passing out on the lawn.

GRAEME NEIL REID (*Artist*) lives and works in Scotland, and for the last ten years has worked on a variety of different artistic jobs. From sign painting, cartoon strips, large scale murals, web graphics, fine oil paintings and digital manipulation. "I'm often asked to describe my style of work, but I feel as a freelance illustrator that you should be able to approach any job and produce it in a style of your clients choosing. Why limit yourself to one style or ability." To see more of Graeme's work visit www.harddiskfsnetco.uk, updated on a regular basis it features recent work, archive material and contact details.

GARY RUSSELL (*"Head in the Sand"*) is a prolific author whose many *Doctor Who* novels include *Business Unusual, Divided Loyalties, Legacy, Invasion of the Cat People* and *The Scales of Injustice*, and is the former editor of *Doctor Who Magazine*. He is the producer of Big Finish Productions' successful line of *Doctor Who* audios and the also cool *Bernice Summerfield* series, and is way too busy for his own good.

MARY ELLEN SANDAHL (*Artist*) lives in New Jersey, USA, and has been drawing since she was 4 years old. She does computer graphics for money... but has much more fun doing it the old-fashioned way. If she were allowed to, she'd sit home all day illustrating things by hand, listening to Scandinavian roots music, reading Patrick O'Brian, and occasionally brushing the cobwebs out of her hair. She's been an SF fan since childhood, a *Doctor Who* fan since the early 80s, a deep-dyed Paul McGann fan since May of 1996, and would dearly love to see the Eighth Doctor return.

JIM SANGSTER (*Artist*) used to dream of making monsters for *Doctor Who* ever since he read an interview with John Friedlander in *Doctor Who Monthly*. Having become the unofficial beast-wrangler for Big Finish, he feels he's achieved his dreams.

CAVAN SCOTT and **MARK WRIGHT** ("The Arches") met while working at Future Publishing and decided that they quite liked the idea of writing stories together. Mark spends his time spinning shiny discs as Reviews

Editor for *What DVD* Magazine and lives in London. He has also written for *T3, SFX, Cult Times* and erm... *Diesel Car*. Cav, who abides with his long suffering wife Sarah in deepest darkest Bristol, spends his days as Features Editor on top tech magazine, *T3*. His hobbies include chocolate Hob Nob biscuits, crippling himself at the gym and being very, very loud. Together they made their debut in the pages of *Professor Benny Summerfield and the Dead Men Diaries* and are currently putting the final touches to *Project: Twilight*, available in August 2001 from Big Finish Productions.

PETER (PSHAW!) SHAW (*Artist*) is a 29 year old artist/writer who lives and works in Brisbane, Australia. His interest in *Doctor Who* goes back many years, and for the last ten years has been the artist for the Brisbane Doctor Who Fan Club's fanzine *"Mistfall"* (which has now, sadly, all but folded). His favourite Doctor is Sylvester McCoy, and he is almost anal in his determination to have everybody accept the fact that the millennium only started this year.

ROB SHEARMAN (*"A Winter's Tale"*) is best known for his popular role as Corporal Belching in BBC TV's seventies children serial *Doctor Who*. Week after week he was onscreen alongside John Pertwee battling the dreaded Daleks, creepy crawlies from outer space, and, of course, the dreaded DALEKS. Robert was proud to be a member of the UNIT family (a phrase he coined himself under the mistaken belief he was in fact related to most of the cast) and his catchphrases of 'How do, Doctor?' and 'How do, Master?' could be heard chanted in playgrounds the Home Counties over. Since leaving the serial (a move kindly suggested by the producers fearing he might get typecast) Shearman has worked extensively in pantomime, and last year at the Edinburgh Festival his one-man show of reminiscences about appearing in BBC TV's seventies children serial *Doctor Who* actually got a review in *The Scotsman*. Robert wanted to write a story reflecting his time in the show, but we persuaded him to write about a penguin instead. Enjoy.

TRINA L. SHORT (*"Tee Time"*) is a high school physics teacher in small town America. What sets her apart from many other high school

physics teachers is her love of *Doctor Who*. She writes fan fiction from time to time, usually sticking with the Seventh Doctor or Turlough. For a change of pace, however, she decided to try *The Dominie* for this fanzine. Trina has been published in the webzines *Dreamtime* and *Triskadecaphobia* and the paper 'zines *Perfect Timing, The 13 Crimes of Doctor Who*, and *The Cat Who Walked Through Time.*

NATHAN A. SKRESLET (*"The Dark Domain"*) also artist, cover artist) is a full-time second year Industrial Design student at Virginia Tech, a freelance graphic designer and he writes a short story every now and then. He is also a Triplet. A *Doctor Who* fan since the age of 8, he is glad to be back in America after 8 years in Egypt and once more has access books and video tapes. He first got involved in *Doctor Who* anthologies with the *Perfect Timing* collections, contributing both the covers and a short story and illustration for each. Since then he has done the cover for David J. Howe's *Howe's Transcendental Toybox* and been commissioned to do one for Julian Bales' *Walking in Eternity*, Helen Fayle's *Nine Lives* and some other image work for Lance Parkin. He also did the cover of the book you are now holding. Needless to say, he is a busy guy.

His story occurs during Frontios. **DALE SMITH** (*"The Puppet King"*; plus, artist) occured during *The Deadly Assassin*. The cancellation of *DWM's Brief Encounters* occured immediately after his two stories were published. His first professional play occurred six months later. His first threat to quit writing *Doctor Who* books for the BBC will occur as soon as he manages to get one accepted. His admission that, despite using the third person, he has written this himself, will never occur.

GREGG SMITH (*"Just Love"*) wrote his story in 1998, and it finally sees the light of day in a slightly re-vamped form. It probably takes place a few pages after the bit that takes place a few pages after the end of *The Dying Days*. The author can no longer distinguish between his computer and his cat, and would like to take the opportunity of this compulsory biography to highlight how little he has accomplished in his

twenty-two years of life.

ROBERT SMITH? (*"The Painting"*) actually does have a question mark in his name, so please stop sending him emails about it. He lives in a colony of beautiful women in Canada, frequently gets mistaken for a woman, occasionally does some mathematics for his PhD and can't get by without his daily dose of Special K. He's disturbingly glad that his life is interesting enough that he didn't have to make anything up for this bio.

ALEX STEER (*"Casket 44"*) lives in Surrey, England with an old computer, a new computer and lots of books. A writer and poet by night, by day he edits a small political magazine and sells books. Somewhere in the twilight hours he wrote *"Casket 44"*, his first short story. The darkness of the story could be attributed to childhood cultural influences, particularly his terrified introduction to *Doctor Who* at the climax of *Revelation of the Daleks*, or to some great philosophical insight on the nature of human existence. But really it's because he's mad. Totally mad.

DEBORAH T. STEVENS (*"Magnificent Folly"*) grew up the youngest of seven in Connecticut and New Jersey, and now lives in Florida. She's been writing her own series since freshman year in high school, right about the same time she discovered *Doctor Who*. Now 20 years on, the two are merged. She only recently started writing fan fiction and this is her first true *Doctor Who* fan fiction, no crossovers. The title derives from the phrase the Doctor used in *"Evil of the Daleks"* when he tells Jamie about witnessing the charge. Any and all comments will be welcomed at FlynnKlly@aol.com.

DAVE STONE (*"An Inconsequential Death"*), author of many *Doctor Who* and related books such as *Sky Pirates!, Death and Diplomacy, Heart of TARDIS, Oblivion, The Mary Sue Extrusion* and the forthcoming *The Slow Empire*, is the best #$%&@ writer you'll ever #$Â°/.&@ing see, and he's going to #$%&@ing commit suicide if he doesn't start getting the respect and #$%&@ing money he #$%&@ing

deserves. Too late. Ak! Glug! #$%&@!!! RIP.

KATHRYN SULLIVAN (*"Of Chocolates and Queens"*), like Evelyn Smythe, loves chocolate and teaches at a university, but Kathryn's field is the library and her other vocation is writing SF and fantasy. Her short stories have been published in e-zines (*Twilight Times, Anotherealm* and *Pegasus Online*) and print (most recently in *Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Dead Men Diaries*). Her book, *The Crystal Throne*, was released in December 2000 by Starlight Writer Publications.

Though he is known primarily for drawing cartoon bears, **CHRIS SUTOR** (*Artist*) has also spent an exhaustive amount of time creafting 3D imagery based on *Doctor Who*. He hopes to someday use his abilities to provide artwork for licenced *Doctor Who* properties such as book or CD covers. He currently resies in the probably-fictional state of Delaware, on the east coast of the definately-fictional United States of America. More of his *Doctor Who* work may be viewed at the Fluid Links Art Gallery at http://www.fumation.com/cobalt/tardis.html

ALAN TAYLOR (*"The Art Of Compassion"*) is a serious professional who travels across South East Asia full time, although he's nominally based in Hong Kong. This is not nearly as interesting as it sounds, so he writes *Doctor Who* fiction in hotels in the evening as an alternative to going to the gym.

WITOLD TIETZE (*"Blind"*) loves his girlfriend very much. She is the light of his life, she is his inspiration, she is the source of his joy. He finds prose writing to be increasingly difficult as he gets on in years. He owns no cigars or Ferraris.

JENNIFER TIFFT (*"Just Who Is the Doctor?," "Sonnet: Room With No Doors"* and *"Nursery Verse for a Loomling"*) is a costumer, writer, poet, and occasional mystic. She supports her avocations and addictions working as a Technical Writer for a software company. Not currently owned by a cat, she does hope someday to own a house with both a sewing room and a study/library.

SUSANNAH TILLER (*"All the Time in the World"*) lives in Newcastle, Australia. Her writing explores the way ordinary peoples' lives are affected by the Doctor and those who travel with him. In her stories, ordinary emotions are juxtaposed against mythological, psychological and urban landscapes. They explore genres rarely seen in *Doctor Who*, including epic fantasy and romance. *"All the Time in the World"* is the fourth story in the Maguire series. The other stories are *"Kids Games", "A Night at the Opera"* and *"The Hand of the Goddess"* (published in the fanthology *Perfect Timing 2*). Most recently, Susannah has been writing her Honours thesis in Psychology.

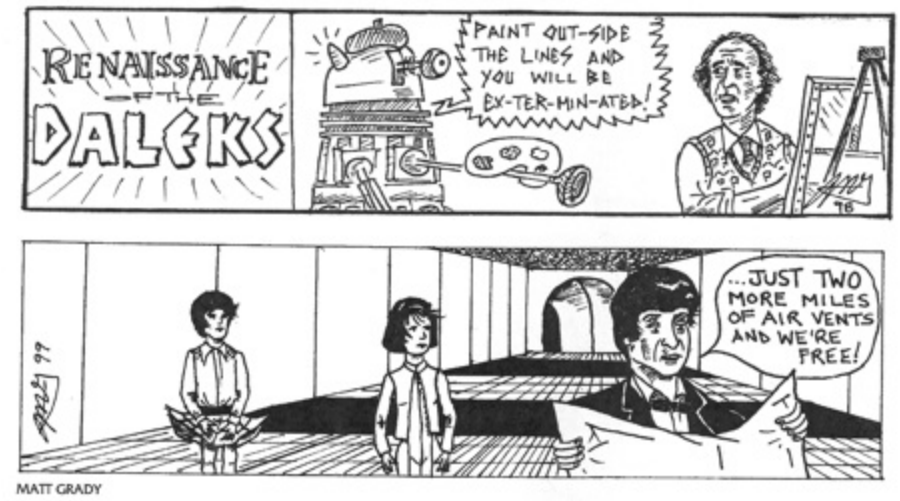
Former football-hooligan and Malibu-addict, **KEITH ANDREW TOPPING** (*"Disturbance at the Heron House"*... by the way, "Discretion" is not his middle name) was born the day Newcastle United lost 3-2 at home to Northampton. Things haven't improved much since. Keith is a freelance journalist and author of 16 books (including 4 *Doctor Who* novels and an international best-seller reference guide to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). He likes loud pop music, 60s horror films, trashy SF-TV, king prawn curries, socialising with friends, annoying pseudo-intellectuals and leather against the skin.

MIKE TUCKER was born in South Wales and spent many of his formative years experimenting with Super 8 cameras, Action Men and fireworks. After seeing Bernard Wilkie on an edition of *Pebble Mill at One*, Mike realized that there was a job which could channel this particular hobby. He joined the BBC Special Effects department and eventually ended up working on *Doctor Who* during the McCoy era; he and Sophie Aldred penned *Ace! The Inside Story of the Making of an Era* about their years on the show. Mike eventually wrote fiction for the BBC both solo and with writing partner Robert Perry, including the novels *Illegal Alien, Storm Harvest, Matrix* and *Prime Time* (the controversial one with the *Oz* reference and a death.)

ANGELA P. WADE (*"A Renegade's Manifesto"*) would like to keep her bio shorter than her story, so, she'll say that she started writing *Doctor Who* stories in college and got a few into 'zines. She showed them to

an editor from West End Games' *Star Wars Adventure Journal*, and started writing *Star Wars* for cash. She thought she was gonna be famous, but since the Journal died, she's back to writing *Doctor Who* for free. "Well," she says, "at least it's fun. May the Valeyard's subpoena become lost on its way to your postbox, and may the Winds of Time blow favorably in your direction."

NICK WALTERS (*"The Great Eskape"*) is the co-author of the Virgin New Adventure *Dry Pilgrimage* and the author of the BBC Doctor Who novels *Dominion, The Fall Of Yquatine* and the forthcoming *Superior Beings*. Plus a few short stories such as the one in this collection. He lives and works in Bristol.


RENAISSANCE OF THE DALEKS
PAINT OUT-SIDE THE LINES AND YOU WILL BE EX-TER-MIN-ATED!
...JUST TWO MORE MILES OF AIR VENTS AND WE'RE FREE!
MATT GRADY

Continuity Guide

In order for our readers to avoid the guesswork of figuring out when each story in the collection actually takes place, and because the editors are completists, we present our Continuity Guide. Please note that this can be counted as spoiler material if you haven't yet read the stories. For further information on Doctor Who continuity, visit the Canon Keepers' Guide at Outpost Galley at http://www.gallifreyone.com/canon.htm

Aspects of Evil

The 13th Doctor and the Guardians, unspecified time frame.

Letting Go

First Doctor, Ben and Polly; an interlude during 'The Tenth Planet'.

An Inconsequential Death

The Doctor 's future, unspecified time frame.

How The Mighty...

Seventh Doctor; after 'Lungbarrow', immediately prior to the 'TV Movie'.

Fiction Paradox

Sixth Doctor & Melanie; between 'Trial of a Time Lord: Terror of the Vervoids' and 'Millennial Rites', set after the story 'Painting History' in Perfect Timing II.

Iris Explains

Eighth Doctor; during 'Father Time'.

A Time to Choose

Romana II; after 'Warriors' Gate'.

Waste

Second Doctor, Jamie and Zoe; between 'The Space Pirates' and 'The War Games' and after 'The Menagerie'.

Missing Pieces

Eighth Doctor; between 'The Ancestor Cell' and 'The Burning'.

Time Out

Seventh Doctor; during 'The Room With No Doors'.

Dinner Conversation

Fourth Doctor and Romana II; between 'Destiny of the Daleks' and 'City of Death'.

Of Chocolates and Queens

Sixth Doctor and Evelyn Smythe; between 'The Marian Conspiracy' and 'The Spectre of Lanyon Moor'.

Irresistible Force

Fifth Doctor; shortly after 'The Awakening' as his companions remain on holiday in Little Hodcombe.

Magnificent Folly

First Doctor, Steven and Dodo; between 'The Gunfighters' and 'The Savages'.

The Art of Compassion

Third Doctor and Sarah, with Compassion; between 'The Monster of Peladon' and 'Planet Of The Spiders,' and, for Compassion, during 'Frontier Worlds'.

Outside Forces

Eighth Doctor and Compassion; between 'Parallel 59' and 'The Shadows of Avalon' (also, Victoria Waterfield and Fitz Kreiner, unspecified time frame).

The Great Eskape

Skagra; set some time after 'Shada'.

Revolver

Second Doctor, between 'The War Games' and 'Spearhead from Space ' (during the 'Season 6B' era).

The Puppet King

Kamelion, with a brief appearance by the Fifth Doctor; concurrent with 'Frontios'.

Tea With Cthulhu

Seventh Doctor, Chris and Roz; between 'Christmas on a Rational Planet' and 'Return of the Living Dad'.

The Ashes of Eden

Fourth Doctor & Romana II; between 'Shada' and 'The Leisure Hive'.

The Dark Domain

Third Doctor; between 'The Green Death' and 'The Time Warrior'.

Dead Men's Place

Fifth Doctor, Tegan and Turlough; between 'The Awakening' and 'Frontios ' and after 'The King of Terror'.

A Whisper of Light

Seventh Doctor; between 'Lungbarrow' and the 'TV Movie'.

The Breach

First Doctor and Steven; between 'The Daleks' Master Plan' and 'The Massacre'.

A Tale of Monsters

Sixth Doctor; after 'Trial of a Time Lord' before the Doctor has met Melanie again in 'Business Unusual'.

The Killing of a Flash Boy

Eighth Doctor and Fitz; between 'Demontage' and 'Revolution Man' and prior to 'This Hollywood Life' in Perfect Timing I.

The Painting

Fourth Doctor; between 'The Deadly Assassin' and 'The Face of Evil'.

The Shadow Knows...

Second Doctor, Jamie and Zoe; between 'The Mind Robber' and 'The Invasion'.

The Wings of a Butterfly

Sixth Doctor; set prior to 'Business Unusual'.

Old Scores

Third Doctor and the Master; immediately after 'The Green Death'.

A Stone of the Heart

The Master; set sometime in his life after 'Frontier in Space' and long before 'The Deadly Assassin'.

The Last Song I'll Ever Sing

First Doctor, Steven and Sara Kingdom; between 'The Daleks' Master Plan' episodes six and seven.

Watch Out! Watch Out!

Fourth Doctor, Romana I and K-9; in the 'some time later' on page 126 of the 1980 paperback edition of 'The Armageddon Factor'

The Isidore Corporation

Sixth Doctor, Peri and Frobisher; between 'Revelation of the Daleks' and 'The Trial of a Time Lord'.

A Winter's Tale

Frobisher; set some time in his future.

Rock and a Hard Place

Fifth Doctor, Tegan and Turlough; between 'Warriors of the Deep' and 'The Awakening' and after 'Deep Blue'.

Fitz Kreiner and the Onion Doom

Fitz Kreiner; sometime before 'The Taint'.

The Doctor and the Dragon

Seventh Doctor; between 'Lungbarrow ' and the 'TV Movie'.

Eurydice's Reprieve

First Doctor, Steven and Katarina; concurrent with the first few episodes of 'The Daleks' Master Plan'.

Brought to Book

Sixth Doctor, Peri, with Shellingbourne Grant; set immediately after 'Slipback' and prior to 'The Trial of a Time Lord'.

Oblivion Lurks Near the Coffee Machine

Fourth Doctor and Romana I, with a brief cameo by K9; between 'The Armageddon Factor' and 'Destiny of the Daleks'

Tempus Refugit

Third Doctor, Jo and UNIT; between 'The Three Doctors' and 'Carnival of Monsters' and after 'The Wages of Sin' (or 'And Eternity in an Hour' if you count the Decalog stories).

All the Time in the World

Sam Jones and Jacqueline Maguire, with an appearance by the Eighth Doctor; various times land places.

Just Love

Bernice Summerfield; after 'The Dying Days'.

On the Town

Leela and K-9; between 'Image of the Fendahl' and 'The Sun Makers'.

The Silent City

First Doctor, Steven and Vicki; between 'The Time Meddler' and 'Galaxy 4' and after 'The Empire of Glass'.

Self Delusion

Sixth Doctor and Peri, and Seventh Doctor, Ace and Bernice; between 'Revelation of the Daleks' and 'The Trial of a Time Lord' and between 'White Darkness' and 'Shadowmind'.

The Arches

Seventh Doctor; between 'Lungbarrow' and the 'TV Movie'.

Juggling

Fifth Doctor and Nyssa; between 'Time Flight' and 'Arc of Infinity'

Mind Over Matter

Fourth Doctor; between 'The Deadly Assassin' and 'The Face of Evil' and after Millennium Shock'.

In the Days of 'The Days of 'The Days of Our Lives"

Second Doctor, Ben and Polly; between 'Power of the Daleks' and 'The Highlanders' and after The Murder Game'.

For Queen and Country

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart and the Third Doctor; between 'The Green Death' and The Time Warrior'.

Tee Time

The Dominie and Alice; before BBV's 'Prosperity Island' and later after BBV's 'Ghosts,' plus before - and later after - Doctor Who's 'The Invasion'.

Loose Ends

Eighth Doctor and Sam; between 'Seeing I' and 'Placebo Effect'.

Time Gained, Time Lost

First Doctor, Susan, Ian and Barbara; between 'The Reign of Terror' and 'Planet of Giants'.

Fear and Logarithms in Las Vegas

Fourth Doctor and K9; between 'The Invasion of Time' and 'The Ribos Operation'.

The Science of Magic, and Vice Versa (aka Attack of the Gluons)

Third Doctor, Jo Grant, UNIT and Miss Olive Hawthorne; between 'The Daemons' and 'Day of the Daleks'.

In the Frame

Seventh Doctor and Ace; between 'Ghost Light' and 'The Curse of Fenric'.

A Renegade's Manifesto

Sixth Doctor and Peri; between 'Revelation of the Daleks' and 'The Trial of a Time Lord'

Bedlam

Fourth Doctor and Sarah; immediately following 'The Brain of Morbius'.

Head in the Sand

Eighth Doctor and Charley; between 'Storm Warning' and 'Sword of Orion'.

Raymond's Room

Fifth Doctor, Tegan and Nyssa; between 'Snakedance' and 'Mawdryn Undead' and after 'Goth Opera'.

The Billion Year Heart

Dalek; unspecified time frame.

Disturbance at the Heron House

Ian Chesterton & Barbara Wright, in their future.

Fate Healer

Seventh Doctor and Ace; between 'The Curse of Fenric' and 'Survival' and after 'The Hollow Men',

Shadows Cast

Eighth Doctor; unknown time period.

Casket 44

Fourth Doctor and Sarah; between 'The Seeds of Doom' and 'The Masque of Mandragora,' before 'System Shock'.

While Stocks Last

Sixth Doctor and Peri; between 'Revelation of the Daleks' and 'The Trial of a Time Lord', right after 'The Ultimate Evil'.

Blind

Second Doctor, Ben and Polly; between 'Power of the Daleks' and 'The Highlanders',

Coda

Harry Sullivan and Liz Shaw; immediately following 'Terror of the Zygons'.

The Star Racer

Eighth Doctor; between 'The Dying Days' and 'Storm Warning'.

The Memory of Stones

Seventh Doctor and Ace; between 'Matrix' and 'Storm Harvest'.

Here Again

Fifth Doctor, Adric, Nyssa and Tegan; between 'Four to Doomsday' and 'Kinda'.

Going Home

Anji Kapoor and the Sixth Doctor; before 'Escape Velocity' and between 'Attack of the Cybermen' and 'Vengeance on Varos'.

Eye of the Beholder

Eighth Doctor and Sam Jones; between 'Seeing I' and 'Placebo Effect'.

In vino veritas

First Doctor, Susan, Ian and Barbara; between 'Planet of Giants' and 'The Dalek Invasion of Earth'.

Walk a Mile In My Shoes

Third Doctor, Jo Grant, Benton, Yates and the Brigadier; immediately after 'Colony in Space'.

Where Were You

Unspecified Doctor; long before 'An Unearthly Child'.

Fathers, Friends and Other Objects of Hate

First Doctor; before 'An Unearthly Child'.

Should Have Been Dancing

A Moment to Myself

Just Who Is The Doctor?

Sonnet - The Room with No Doors

Nursery Verse for a Loomling

The Dead Series Sketch

All Apocryphal

The Dead Series Sketch

PETER ANGHELIDES

As a final "missing piece," we present Peter Anghelides' "Dead Series Sketch"*. This sketch was performed at the* Gallifrey One *convention in sunny Los Angeles in February 2000. Peter Anghelides played the Fan and Justin Richards played BBC Man. Stephen Cole played Man in Audience (00V). With apologies to John Cleese and Michael Palin in* Monty Python's Flying Circus*.*

Fan: Hello, I wish to register a complaint... Hello? Miss?

BBC Man: What do you mean, miss?

Fan: Oh, I'm sorry, I'm a Doctor Who fan and I can't tell the difference. I wish to make a complaint.

BBC Man: Well, I'm the Head of the BBC Drama Department, and I'm closed for lunch.

Fan: Never mind that, my lad. I wish to complain about this TV series what I was watching not 18 months ago produced by this very BBC Drama Department.

[Brandishes video cassette of Timelash]

BBC Man: *[Looks at tape.*] Oh yes, the Doctor Who. What's wrong with it.

Fan: I'll tell you what's wrong with it. It's dead, that's what's wrong with it.

BBC Man: No, no, we've rested it, look.

[Shows copy of Variety, big headline: BBC Cancels Dr Who.]

Fan: Rested it?

BBC Man: Yeah, remarkable series the Doctor Who, beautiful special effects, innit?

Fan: The special effects don't enter into it. *[To audience.]* Fortunately. *[To BBC Man.]* This series is stone dead.

BBC Man: No, no - it's just been rested.

Fan: All right then, if it's just been rested, I'll look for a new series in my Broadcasting Guide. *[Takes out copy of Radio Times.]* Hello Doctor Who! Have you got a nice new series starting? I've got a nice crowd of three hundred Doctor Who fans waiting to boost your ratings when you return to Prime Time TV. Come back, Doctor Who!

BBC Man: *[Points to random page.]* There! That's a new series!

Fan: No it's not, that's the radio section.

BBC Man: It is not.

Fan: Yes it is. Ifs on BBC Radio 4.

BBC Man: No, it's cross-media.

Fan: Look my lad, I've had just about enough of this. *[Waves video.]* That TV series is definitely deceased. And when I was watching it not 18 months ago you assured me that the lack of an announcement about a new series was due to it being tired and shagged out after a long producer.

BBC Man: It's probably pining for Saturday night transmission.

Fan: Pining for Saturday night transmission? Pining for Saturday night..? What kind of talk is that? Look, why did it fall flat on its back the moment it was scheduled against Coronation Street?

BBC Man: The Doctor Who prefers being scheduled against hugely popular soap operas. Fabulous series, beautiful special effects.

Fan: Look, I took the liberty of examining that series, and I discovered

the only reason it was still being made was that the BBC could flog it to the Yanks.

BBC Man: Well of course we flogged it to the Yanks. Once those PBS stations broadcast it, we knew it would muscle up to those Nielsen ratings and voom!

Fan: Look matey. *[Waves video.]* This TV series wouldn't voom if I put five million dollars into it and put it on the Fox Network. It's bleeding demised.

BBC Man: It's not, it's resting.

Fan: It's not resting, it's passed on. This series is no more. It has ceased to be. It's expired, been cancelled, gone into syndication. This is a "classic" series. It's a stiff. Bereft of production, it's just seen in repeats. If you hadn't flogged it to the Yanks it would be pushing up the daisies. It's flicked the channel changer and joined the video library. This is an ex-series.

BBC Man: Well, I'd better commission a replacement then.

[BBC Man shuffles around looking for a replacement in a brown cardboard box of videos.]

Fan: *[To audience.]* If you want to get anything commissioned in the United Kingdom, you've got to complain until you're blue in the mouth.

BBC Man: Sorry guy, we're right out of money for Doctor Who.

Fan: I see. I see. I get the picture.

BBC Man: *[Waves a video.]* I can do you a Red Dwarf.

Fan: Does it have a Police Box?

BBC Man: Not really, no.

Fan: Well, it's scarcely a replacement, then is it?

BBC Man: Listen, I'll tell you what, *[Rummages for another video.]* tell you what, I'll do you a co-production deal with Leonard Nimoy and Dino de Laurentiis. Or there's this series produced by Jason Haigh-Ellery and Gary Russell... aaagh!

[Fan picks up large mallet and pummels BBC Man to death.]

Fan: He's lucky I didn't ask him about Blake's 7.

[Both crawl off in wings before downpour of over-ripe fruit hails down on to stage from audience.]

Afterword

SYLVESTER McCOY

I've been given the honor of being asked to close out this volume by saying a few things about the importance of *Doctor Who* fans supporting charity efforts such as this. Well, it seems to me that *Doctor Who* fans have a long tradition of support for worthy causes through their love of the programme.

For one thing, there's the Children In Need appeals, which have long included participation by members of the cast of *Doctor Who*, most notably the (in)famous *Dimensions In Time* special featuring yours truly, and virtually every other luminary in the *Doctor Who* universe. 3-D, 7 Doctors, and a big packet tor charity.

More recently, the Comic Relief organization raised literally millions of pounds worldwide on the night of their BBC charity appeal spectacular. No small part of that success was definitely due to the brilliant spoof of our beloved programme carried out by my "fellow persona" Rowan Atkinson (and friends...)

On the other side of the pond, there's all the ongoing swell of support from American viewers of *Doctor Who*, pledging their hard earned dollars every pledge night to keep their favourite programme on the air for another few months. Only a month ago, Carole Ann Ford and I were whisked off of the Sci-Fi Sea Cruise and taken across San Francisco Bay to take part in a live pledge night for the PBS viewers in San Jose. Only a few days later, on my way back to England, the cruise people arranged for me to do yet another live fund-raiser in Pittsburgh, this one also being taped for later broadcast by PBS in half a dozen other cities. A "National Doctor Who Night" they were calling it. They tell me that over $25,000 was raised just on the nights of the live broadcasts alone, with that figure expected to more than double by the time all the local PBS stations have had their go at playing the night's tape.

Yes, *Doctor Who* fans do have a long tradition of supporting good

causes, and as you hold this volume in your hands, you can be proud of the small part your purchase of it has played in helping to raise funds to support such worthy organizations as the Foundation for the Study of Infant Death and the Downs' Syndrome Association. With enough help from people "Who" care, perhaps they'll find the "Missing Pieces" they need in order to come up with the cures.

Sylvester McCoy

Chicago, Illinois 26 November 2000